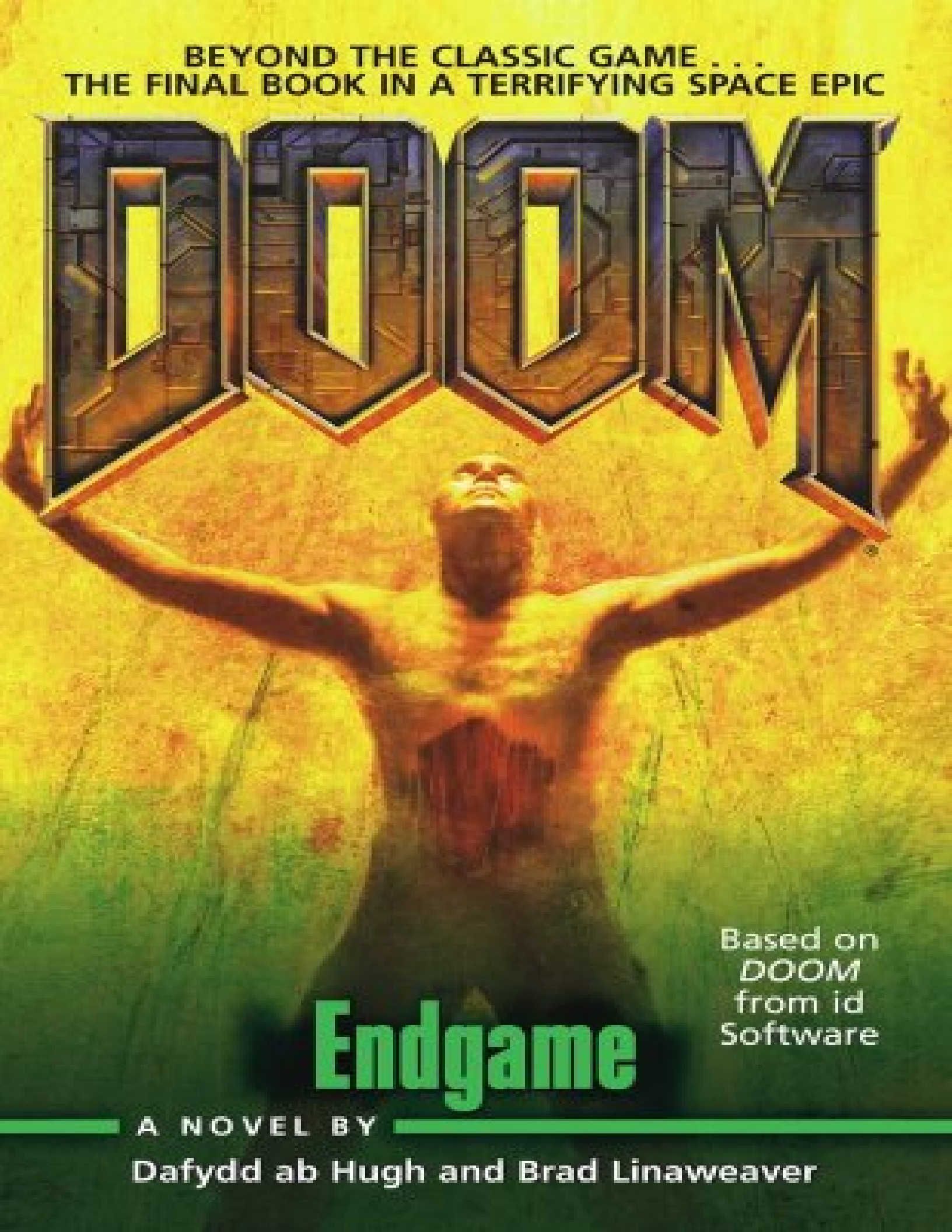
BEYOND THE CLASSIC GAME . . .
THE FINAL BOOK IN A TERRIFYING SPACE EPIC

DOOM



Based on *DOOM* from id Software

Endgame

A NOVEL BY

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The ship was 3.7 klicks long, and I walked every damned meter of it, trying to find where all the creaks and groans were coming from. I wasn't surprised to hear the haunting noises; I expected nothing less nightmarish from the Fred aliens. They came to us as aliens in demonic clothing, playing to every Jungian fear that panicked the human race, from deep inside the collective whatever you call it—Arlene would know. Now their ship sounded like it was tearing apart at the seams … or like the entire universe was finally winding down. I walked down moist fungus-infested passageways that were too tall, too narrow, and too damned hot, listening to the universe run down.

Down and out. Mostly I walked the ship to keep some sort of tab on Lance Corporal Arlene Sanders, my ghost XO, who was falling apart on me. Nobody goes off the deep end on Sergeant Flynn Taggart, not without my say-so. But there was Arlene, sitting cross-legged on the observation deck (the "mess hall") at the stern of the Fred ship, staring at a redshifted eye of light that was all the stars in the galaxy swirled into one blob—some sort of relativity effect. She sat, unblinking, peering down the corridor of time to Earth today, which was probably Earth two hundred years or more ago.

Christ, but that sounds melancholy. Arlene hadn't changed her uniform in three days, and she was starting to stink up the place. I didn't want to interrupt her grief: she had lost her beloved … in a sense; by the time we hit dirt at Fredworld, kicked some Fred ass, and got them to turn us around back to Earth again, about two hundred years would have passed for the mudhoppers. Corporal Albert Gallatin would be a century in his grave. He was as good as dead to her now.

Space is a lonely place; don't let anyone tell you different. The spacefaring surround themselves with friends and squadmates, but it only holds the emptiness of deep space partway off. You can still feel it brushing your mind, probing for a weak point. We tried playing various games to stave off the loneliness; I came up with the favorite, Woe Is Me: we competed to see

who could spin the most depressing tale of woe, me or Arlene … listing in endlessly expanding detail all the different reasons to just open a hatch and be blown into the interstellar void. I always won—not that I had that many more reasons to despair than Arlene, but because I had more practice complaining about things. “I left my true love behind,” she would pine. “At least you had one!” I retorted. “All I ever had was a fiancee, and I’m not sure I even knew her middle name.” Sears and Roebuck, our normally jovial binary Klave pair, were no help; they locked themselves in their cabin and wouldn’t come out. They couldn’t even be coaxed out for a game of Woe Is Me! But lately Arlene was winning by default: she was too depressed to play. She just sat and stared out the rear window.

The Fred ship was roughly cylindrical, spinning for a kind of artificial gravity about 0.8 g at the outer skin; in addition, during the first days, we had a heavy acceleration pulling us backward as the ship got up to speed. This was a Godsend; I always hated zero-g, always. I always blew; I always got vertigo; I never knew which way was up, because there was no up. It was 3.7 kilometers long and about 0.375 kilometers in diameter, I reckoned. I had some mild dizziness from the spin—my inner ear never really adjusted to that sort of crap—but it was a damned sight better than the “float ‘n’ pukes” we rode from Earth to Mars, or up to Phobos.

For the last twenty-four hours, I had followed Arlene up and down the ship when she went wandering, through blackness and flickering light. The whole place tasted vile; most of taste is smell, and the stench got on the back of my tongue and stayed there. Arlene probably knew I was there, but she made no attempt to talk to me. Occasionally, I heard weapons fire; I thought she might be shooting up the “dead” bodies of the Fred aliens. I couldn’t believe it; she knew they could still feel the pain of the bullets! Then I caught her discharging her shotgun into a man-shaped chalk outline she’d drawn on a bulkhead in a stateroom that once belonged to the ship’s engineer, a Fred who was deactivated up on the bridge. “What the hell are you doing, A.S.?” I demanded. “Shooting,” she said, staring dully at me. She slid her hands up and down the barrel of her piece, getting gun grease on her palms, but she didn’t notice. “You’re shooting into a steel bulkhead, you brain-dead dweeb! Where do you think the bullets are going when they bounce off it?”

Arlene said nothing. She hadn't been hit by a ricochet yet, but if she kept shooting at steel bulk-heads, it was only a matter of moments. Two minutes after I left, I heard the shooting start up again, but she denied later that she had fired her rifle again.

I returned to the bridge for a long face-to-face with the "dead" Fred captain. They're not like us … rather, we're not like them or the rest of the intelligent races of the galaxy.

A Fred alien, and everybody else except a human, can never die. Even when you shoot his body to Swiss cheese, so his blue guts and red blood dribble out the holes onto the deck, his consciousness remains intact. Blow his head apart, and it floats as a ghost, drifting like invisible smoke—still thinking, hearing and seeing, feeling and desperately dreaming. You can talk to them; they actually hear you.

The Freds and other races pile their dead in fantastic cenotaph theaters where they are entertained day and night by elaborate operas and dances of great beauty, all to keep the "dead" vibrant and interested until such time as they're needed for revivification—assuming there's enough left of the body and enough interest on the part of an animate Fred to pay for it. I'd shot the captain nine days ago as he lay on the floor, reaching up to implement and lock in the preprogrammed course for Fredworld. Despite the best efforts of me and Arlene and our contractor-advisors Sears and Roebuck—a Klave binary pair who each looked like a cross between Magilla Gorilla and Alley Oop—we couldn't figure out how to change course or even shut off the engines.

I picked the captain up and sat him in the co-pilot's chair. Poetic justice; he had died bravely … let him see where he was going. Now I stood directly in front of the bastard so his dead eyes could drink me in. "God, I wish I could repair your wounds and bring you back to life," I said, "so I could kill you all over again and again and again, and repeat the process until you told me how to turn this piece-of-crap ship around. But I promise you I'll obliterate your brain before I'll let you be recaptured and revived by your Fred buddies."

I blamed the captain for Arlene's psychosis; I would never forgive him for it and would kill him again if I ever got the chance.

Christ, where to jump in on this thing? I never know where to start to bring everyone up to date. Sears and Roebuck had locked themselves in their stateroom, the double-entities shouting that we were all doomed, game over, pull the plug! God only knew where they picked up the expressions, but the sentiment was pretty clear: when we got to Fredworld, the most logical outcome was for us to be burned into a nice warm plasma by the batteries of heavy-particle weapons the Freds obviously had ringing their hellish planet.

I'm not a big fan of logic. Logic predicted that Arlene and I would be smoked during our last encounter with the Freds. They had everything except the homecourt advantage, and even that was dicey, the way they could change the architecture of Phobos and Deimos at the drop of a flaming snotball. When this donnybrook first started, Arlene and I both thought we were dealing with actual honest-to-Lucifer demons from hell! They sure looked like demons; we battled the sons of bitches deep, deeper into the Union Aerospace Corporation facilities on Phobos and Deimos, the two moons of Mars. All the rest of Fox Company, Light Drop Marine Corps Infantry, were killed … and some were "reworked" into undead zombies.

That was the worst, seeing my buddies coming at me, brainless but still clutching their weaponry. I mowed them down, feeling a little death every time I killed a former friend.

But we faced far more dangerous foes: imps, or spineys, as Arlene liked to call them, who hurled flaming balls of mucus; pinkies … two meters of gigantic mouth with a little pair of legs attached; we faced down ghosts we couldn't see, minotaurlike hell princes with fireball shooters on their wrists … even gigantic one-eyed pumpkins that floated and spat lightning balls at us! But the worst of all were the steam demons: fifteen feet tall with rocket launchers, it was virtually impossible to kill the SOBs. On Earth, we discovered that the Freds were genetically engineering monsters to look and act like human beings, until they suddenly opened up on you with machine guns. They had a few failed attempts that were horrific enough, one a walking skeleton! But the whole mission turned on a fundamental misunderstanding: when last the Freds contacted us, we were at the dividing

line between the Medieval and Renaissance periods, like the late 1400s—and they somehow got the idea we still were. They never realized how fast we evolved socially and technologically; nobody else did it that fast! They came screaming in with demonic machines and genetically engineered fiends, thinking we would fall cowering to our knees, and conquest would be swift and brutal. They weren't prepared for a technological society that no longer believed in demons. They weren't ready for the Light Drop Marine Corps Infantry; they weren't prepared for Arlene and me.

We triumphed, and I got another stripe, but now I was willing to bet a month's leave that we were driving into destruction. No matter how long your hand, the dice eventually turn against you. At least let me take a few dozen of them with me, I prayed. But without Arlene I didn't have much of a chance, let alone much reason, to go on. Earth was dead to me now; when we got back there, if we got back, what would be left after three or four centuries? Would there be a United States, a Washington Monument, a United States Marine Corps? For all we knew, the Earth was "already" a smoking burnt-out cinder ("already" is a relative term, we've found out; by the time we get back, it will have happened a certain number of centuries in the past; that's all I can say). Stars rolled past the porthole beneath my feet; actually, it was the ship that rotated, but everything was relative. I followed Arlene as she traversed the ship. She set up her shooting range in the aft cargo-hold, a ways outboard ("down") from the mess hall, seventy meters high and wide and nearly half a kilometer long. I was desperate—I had to snap her out of her zombie mode. I had to do something! So just as my redheaded lance corporal babe raised her M-14, I stepped out of the shadows directly in front of her.

It was an incredibly stupid thing to do—but I had no choice, no other way to get her attention. She almost squeezed off a burst anyway, because she just plain didn't see me. As Arlene squeezed the trigger, she realized the range wasn't clear. She screamed—like a woman!—and jerked the barrel to the left. A single three-round burst escaped anyway. One of the bullets creased my uniform; it felt like she had whipped me across the arm with a corrections staff. It hurt like hell!

"FLY!" she screamed, slinging her rifle aside and running up to me.

I sank to one knee, holding my arm; it wasn't bleeding bad, but I was knocked off balance by the blow—and by the knowledge that had Arlene reacted a fraction of a second slower, I would have been stretched out on the steel deckplates, coughing up my own blood.

Completely calm now, Arlene Sanders un-Velcroed my Marine recon jacket and gently slipped it off my arm. When she saw the wound was just a crease, and I would recover in a couple of days, she let loose with a string of invective and obscenities that was Corps to the core! They echoed off the black saw-toothed walls and rattled my brainpan.

She shook me viciously by the uniform blouse. "You dumbass bastard, Fly! What the hell were you thinking, jumping into the line like that? Don't answer! You weren't thinking, that's the problem!" She let me sink back to the deck, suddenly nervous about overstepping the chain. "Uh, that's the problem, Sergeant," she lamely corrected.

I sat up, wiping away the tears on my good sleeve. "Arlene, you dumb broad, I was thinking thoughts as deep as the starry void. I was thinking, now how can I finally get that catatonic zombie girl's attention and snap her out of her despair over Albert?" "Jesus, Fly, is that what this is about?" I put my hand on my shoulder, massaging the muscle gently through my T-shirt. "Lance, I was about ready to hypo you into unconsciousness for a few days to let you work it all out in your dreams. God knows we have enough time—two hundred years to Fredworld, or eight and a half weeks from our point of view. I was just about ready to give up on you." Arlene stared down at the deck, but I wouldn't let up; I finished what I had to say. "I can't afford to lose you, A.S. Those binary freaks Sears and Roebuck are a great source of intel and sardonic comments, but they can't fight for crap. I need you at my back, A.S.; I need the old Arlene. You've got to come back to me and work your magic."

She turned and walked away from me, leaning against the hot bulkhead and swearing under her breath. She couldn't really say anything out loud, not after I had made a point of dragging rank into it (I called her "Lance" to drive home the chain of command). But nothing in the UCMJ said she had to like it.

She didn’t. She wouldn’t speak to me the rest of the day, and all of the next. She took to sulking in the big lantern-lit cabin we had dubbed the mess hall, since that was where we took our meals—well, used to take them; Sears and Roebuck were still holed up in their own stateroom, cowering in terror at the upcoming brawl with the Freds when we hit dirtside; and Arlene ate Anywhere But There, so she wouldn’t have to eat with me; when I entered, she left by another portal, so I ate alone. Then when I left to return to duty (staring out the forward video screen, wondering when something would happen), Arlene snuck in and hid away from me.

I barely saw her any more often than I had before … but I felt a thousand percent relieved, because now she was angry rather than desolate and apathetic. Anger. Now that I have a good handle on. I’m a Marine, for Christ’s sake! What I couldn’t understand was despair.

Angry Marines don’t stay angry for long, especially not at their NCOs. Sergeants are buttheads; we’d both known that since Parris Island! After a while, Arlene took to haunting the mess hall when I was there, sitting far away; then she sat at my too-tall table, but at the other end; then she got around to eating across from me … but she glared a hell of a lot. I waited, patiently and quietly. Eventually, her need for human company battered down her fury at me for risking my life like I did, and she started making snippy comments.

I knew I’d won when she sat down four days after the shooting incident and demanded, “All right, Sergeant, now tell me again why you had to do something so bone-sick stupid as to step in front of a live rifle.” “To piss you off,” I answered, truthfully. Arlene stared, her mouth hanging open. She had shaved her hair into a high-and-tight again, and it was so short on top, it was almost iridescent orange. Her uniform was freshly laundered—Sears and Roebuck had showed us how to use the Fred washing machines when we first took over the ship, two weeks earlier—and I swear to God she had ironed everything. She had been working out, too; she looked harder, tighter than she had just a few days earlier, and it wasn’t just her haircut. Now I was the only one getting soft and flabby.

“To piss me off? For God’s sake, why?”

“A.S.,” I said, leaning so close we were breathing each other’s O2, “I don’t think you realize how close I came to losing you. Despair is a terrible, terrible mental illness; apathy is a freaking disease. I had to do something so shocking, something to give you such a burst of adrenaline, that it would jerk you out of your feedback loop and drag you, kicking and screaming, back to the here and now.”

I scratched my stubbly chin, feeling myself flush. “All right, maybe it was pretty bone-sick stupid. But I was desperate! What should I have done? I don’t think you know just what you mean to me, old girl.” She slid up to sit cross-legged on the table, staring around the huge empty mess hall. No officers around, and no non-coms but me. Why not? “Fly,” she said, “I don’t think you know just what Albert meant to me. Means—meant—is he dead or alive now?” “Probably still alive. It’s only been about twenty years or so on Earth … or will have only been by this point, when we get back there—by which point, it’ll have been two centuries. It’s weird; it’s confusing; it’s not worth worrying about.” I ate another blue square; they tasted somewhat like ravioli—crunchy outside and stuffed with worms that tasted half like cheese, half like chocolate cake. It sounds dreadful, but really it’s not bad when you get used to it. A lot better than the orange squares and gray dumplings, which tasted like rotten fish. The Fred aliens had truly stomach-turning tastes, by and large.

“Fly, when I first joined the squad—you remember Gunny Goforth and the William Tell apple on the head duel?—you were my only friend then.” I remembered the incident. Gunnery Sergeant Go-forth was just being an asshole because he didn’t think women belonged in the Corps—not the Corps and definitely not the Light Drop Marine Corps Infantry—and no way in the nine circles of hell, not by the livin’ Gawd that made him, was Gunnery Sergeant Harlan E. Goforth ever going to let some pussy into Fox Company, the machoest, fightingest company of the whole macho, fighting Light Drop! He decreed that no gal could join his company unless she proved herself by letting him shoot an apple off her head! And Arlene did it! She stood there and let him take it off with a clean shot from a .30-99 bolt-action sniper piece. With iron sights, yet. Then, with a little malicious sneer on her lips, she calmly tossed a second apple to Goforth and made him wear the fruit while she did the William Tell bit. We all loved it; to his credit, the

gunny stood tall and didn't flinch and let her pop it off his dome at fifty meters. After that, what could the Grand Old Man do but welcome her to Fox, however reluctantly? Back in the Freds' mess hall, Arlene continued, nibbling at her own blue square. "You're still my best and first, Fly. But Albert was the first man I really loved. Wilhelm Dodd was the first guy to care about me that way; but I didn't know what love meant until … oh Jesus, that sounds really stupid, doesn't it?" I climbed onto the table myself, and we sat back to back. I liked feeling her warmth against me. It was like keeping double-watch, looking both ways at once. "No. It would have sounded dumb, except I know exactly what you mean. I felt that once, too: young girl in high school, before I joined the Corps." "You never told me, Sergeant—Fly."

"We got as close as you could in a motor vehicle not built for the purpose. She swore she was being religious about the pill, but she got pregnant anyway. I offered to pay either way, and she chose the abortion. After that, well, it just wasn't there anymore; I think they sucked more than the fetus out, to be perfectly grotesque about it… We stopped pretending to be boyfriend-girlfriend when it just got too painful; and then she and her parents moved away. She just waved goodbye, and I nodded."

Arlene snorted. "That's the longest rap you've ever given me, Fly. Where'd you read it?"

"God's own truth, A.S. Really happened just that way."

Arlene leaned back against me, while I stared out the aft port at the redshifted starblob; the mess hall was at the south end of a north-going ship, 1.9 kilometers from the bridge, which was located amid-ships, surrounded by a hundred meters of some weird steel-titanium alloy, and 3.7 kilometers from the engines, all the way for'ard. Sitting in the mess hall, we could look directly backward out a huge, thick, plexiglass window while traveling very near the speed of light relative to the stars behind us. It was a fascinating view; according to astronomical theory—which I'd had plenty of time to read about since we'd been burning from star to star—at relativistic speeds, the light actually bends: all the stars forward press together into a blue blob at the front, all the ones aft press into a red lump at the stern. I wasn't sure how fast we were going, but the formula was easy enough to use if I really

got interested. “I just had a horrible thought,” I said. “We only brought along enough Fredpills to last a few days. We didn’t plan on spending weeks here.” Arlene didn’t say anything, so I continued. “We’ll have to find the Fred recombinant machine and figure out how to use it; maybe Sears and Roebuck know.” Fredpills supplied the amino acids and vitamins essential to humans that Freds lacked in their diet; without them, we would starve to death, no matter how much Fred food we ate.

“Fly,” she said, off in another world, “I’m starting not to care about the Freds anymore. I know why they attacked us: they were terrified of what we represented, death and an honest-to-God soul, and maybe the god of the Israelites is right, huh? Maybe we’re the immortal ones … not the rest of them, the ones who can’t die.”

“So are you thinking that Albert still exists somewhere, maybe in heaven?” I was trying to wrap myself around her problem, not having much luck. She shrugged; I felt it roughly. “So he himself believed; I would never contradict an article of my honey’s faith, especially when I don’t have any contrary evidence.”

“Translation into English?”

“I’ve just stopped caring about the Fred aliens, Fly.

They’re frightened, desperate, and pretty pathetic. And they’re soulless. I mean, two humans against how many of them? Even when Albert and Jill joined us, we were still four against a planetful! And we kicked ass. Maybe it’s just the Marine in me, but I’m starting to wonder why we’re bothering with these dweebs.” “Well, we’ve got about forty-five days left to get our heads straight for what’s probably going to be the final curtain for Fly and Arlene, not to mention poor old Sears and Roebuck. They may be soulless and lousy soldiers, but put enough of them in a room shooting at us and we’re going down, babe.”

Arlene reached into her breast pocket and pulled out two twelve-gauge shells, which she tossed over her shoulder to land perfectly in my lap. “I’ve saved the last two for us, Sarge; just let me know when you’re ready to Hemingway.”

2

Forty-five days is a hell of a long time when we knew we were dropping into a dead zone, even for the Light Drop. Then again, it's not really that long at all… when that's probably our entire life expectancy.

Arlene snapped out of her despair because she didn't want to spend her last few weeks in a self-imposed hell, I guess. She had me, I had her; that's how it was in the beginning, that looked to be how it would end. Except we both had Sears and Roebuck, and that's where everything started to break down. We're Marines above all, and we're programmed like computers to protect and serve, you understand. That means we couldn't just lock and load, stand back to back, and prepare to go down in a hail of Fred-fire when the ship cracked down and the cargo doors opened on Fredworld. We had this crazy idea that we had to protect those two—that one?—Alley Oop, Magilla Gorilla look-alike Klave, or at least try. Step one was to coax it, her, him, or them out of the damned stateroom. We tried the direct approach first:

Arlene and I climbed "up" toward the central axis of the ship. The acceleration decreased to 0.2 g at the level of Sears and Roebuck's quarters, barely enough to avoid my old problems with vertigo. I sure didn't want to go any farther inboard, that was for damned sure.

Arlene didn't look bothered, though; various parts of her anatomy floated pretty free under her uniform, and she looked like she was loving it. I tried not to look at such temptations—fifty-eight days left; I wanted to spend it with my buddy, not trying to force a relationship that had never existed and never ought to exist.

The "upper" corridors were like sewer pipes, corrugated and smelly. The Freds breathed slightly different air than we, but it didn't seem poisonous (Sears and Roebuck swore we could breathe the Fred air). Very tall corridors, to accommodate the Freds when they were in their seed-depositing stage, like gigantic praying mantises … I couldn't reach the roof even by jumping.

Arlene and I slipped and slid down the hot slimy passageway; it took me a few moments to realize that the slime was decomposing leaves from their artichoke-heads.

“You know,” said my lance, when I told her my insight, “we don’t even know whether these are discarded leaves, or whether it’s the decomposed bodies of the Freds themselves. What happens to their bodies when they die? Do they have to put some preservative on them, like Egyptian mummies, to prevent this from happening?” She kicked a pile of glop in which were still visible the ragged framelines of Fred head-leaves.

I shook my head. “I suppose we can keep an eye on the captain and see if he begins to deteriorate.” We figured out that slithering was the easiest way to move along the passageway without falling; it was like ice-skating through an oil slick, but we finally made it to the Sears and Roebuck stateroom.

“Stateroom” was an apt description; it was pretty stately. Because they had to accommodate the constantly changing size of the Freds, the rooms were built to monstrous scale, but with a nice mix of furniture styles. My own, next to Arlene’s down toward the hull in heavier acceleration, had a couple of sit-kneels, a table I could only reach by standing and stretching, and a doughnut-shaped bed-couch. I had no idea what was inside Sears and Roebuck’s quarters because they had not allowed Arlene or me even to sneak a peek. I stood outside the door and pounded the pine, as we used to say at Parris Island, then I thought better of it—Sears and Roebuck had been acting awfully weird lately. I stepped off to one side in case they decided to burn right through the door with a weapon.

Silence. After the second pounding, their shared voice came back with a carefully enunciated “go to away!”

“Open up, Sears and Roebuck!” shouted Arlene, exasperated after just ten seconds of dealing with their intransigence.

“Jeez, you’d never make it as a therapist, A.S.” “I follow the flashlight-pounded-into-the-head school of psychiatry,” she said, and for the first time, it almost sounded as if her heart were in the joke. “Go to elsewhere!”

“What are you?” I demanded. “Afraid of dying?

Why? You can’t die!”

During a long pause, I heard furniture being shoved around. Then the door slid open a crack and two heads, one atop the other, pressed two eyes to the crack. “We once had our spine broken,” they said. They didn’t have spines, exactly; their central nervous system ran right down the center, from what I had seen in their medical records. But it was actually more easily severed than ours because it wasn’t protected by a bone sheath.

“You recovered as soon as someone found you,” Arlene pointed out. “Right?”

“We lay for eleven days into the jungle on [unintelligible planet name]. The Freds slay us will kill us and display-put us on for eternity and throw head-leaves at us.” Sears and Roebuck still had a hard time with English, despite ambassadorial status.

“Come on, S and R,” I tried. “Get a grip. You don’t see me and Arlene cringing—and if we die, we’re gone forever!”

They said something too quietly to catch; it sounded like “we wish we could,” but it could have been “the less you could.”

“S and R, Arlene and I need your help. We need to make a plan for when we hit dirtside on Fredworld.” “Fredpills,” added Arlene in my ear.

“And we need you to show us how to synthesize enough Fredpills to keep us alive to Fredworld … we need about, oh, two hundred and seventy.” Sears and Roebuck did a fast calculation—forty-five days times two people times three meals per day. “You admit we have no plan for to live past landing time!”

“Touche,” admitted Arlene, under her breath. Crap! “For now we need four hundred! We’ll need more—lots, lots more—for surviving on Fredworld until we can figure out how to work one of these damned ships and hop it back home. And you need pills, too, Sears and Roebuck.”

The two Alley Oop faces stared at us a moment, then the Klaves slid open the door with their long limbs, which grew like Popeye arms from below their necks. “We are doomed inside the cabin as out the side the cabin.”

“So you may as well enjoy your last days of life with freedom to move around,” I urged. “After you die, you’ll see and hear only what they choose to show you … if anything.”

“Yes, you are the right about that. You must enter.” They stepped out of the way like Siamese twins, and I entered their quarters for the first time, followed by Arlene. The cabin was so amazingly bizarre that I could barely recognize it as being essentially the same (in structure) as mine! All the furniture was pushed into a huge snarl in the middle of the room, and every square centimeter of wall space was covered by something, whether it was an abstract artwork with real 3-D effects or a mop head nailed to the wall. It looked like a homicidal maniac’s idea of interior design: making the room look like the inside of their disordered minds.

“What the hell?” asked Arlene, staring around at the walls. Sears and Roebuck stood in the center of the room next to the pile of junk, watching us narrowly. The weird part wasn’t that they put stuff up on their walls—I confess to the nasty habit of putting the occasional girly pic or Franks tank action shot on my own walls, when I had something to put. But Sears and Roebuck covered literally every smidgen of bulk-head, as if their terror at the pending landing on Fredworld somehow transferred itself to a fear of battleship gray, the color of the metal behind the pictures. They figured out how to work the printer in the room and dumped every image they could find to plaster on the bulkheads. Then, when they ran out of paper, they started attaching domestic Fred appliances with StiKro. They even turned a table on its side and pressed it against one wall.

The overhead was the color of cooling lava, black with red crack highlights, and it didn’t seem to bother them. I rather liked it myself, and I wasn’t a fan of the wall color—but still!

I looked around. “Do you, ah, you-all want to talk about this?” I tried to sound casual.

“No,” said Sears and Roebuck, without a trace of emotion. And that was that. They never again referred to the wallpapering, they never explained it, and we never found put what the hell they thought they were doing. I think Arlene and I learned something very interesting about alien psychology on Day Thirteen of our trip into Fredland; now if only we knew what we found out!

Sears and Roebuck came out of their hole without looking back, took a new stateroom, and made no effort to cover the walls. We began rehearsing for our last stand, when we would hit dirtside and the doors would slide open.

We even knew what doors would open first. Sears and Roebuck went to work on the Fred computer and cracked it, or part of it, at least. The sequence display of the mission was unclassified, and they displayed it on the 3-D projector in the room we had decided to call the bridge, where the captain’s body still sat in the co-pilot’s chair without decomposing, although his head-leaves had ceased to grow, leaving in place the atrocious orange and black Halloween combination that he wore when I killed him … probably a sign of the emotion of desperate terror.

The timeline was precisely detailed: we knew the very moment we would touch dirt—three days earlier than I guessed—and which systems would operate at what moment. The door-open sequence began about seventy-five minutes after touchdown, and the first door to open after safety checks and powerdown was the aft, ventral cargo bay; it would take eleven minutes to grind backward out of the way. Over the next fifty minutes or so, eleven other doors and access portals would release, and all but two of them would open automatically. We would be boarded by an unholy army of monsters.

The only question was whether the Fred captain had gotten a damned message off before we over-whelmed his defenses. Probably. The final combat took nearly an hour. Would it have done the Fred any good?

At first, I thought that would give them two hundred years’ advance notice that we were coming, but Arlene hooted with laughter when I mentioned it. “What, you think their message travels at infinite speed? What do you think this is, science fiction?” I wracked my neurons for several minutes—physics was never my strong suit, especially not special relativity. Then I

suddenly realized my stupidity: any message sent by the Fred captain could travel only at the speed of light… It would take it two hundred years to reach Fredworld!

So how much of a head start did it have over us?

“Um … twenty years?” I guessed.

Arlene shook her head emphatically. “If our time dilation factor is eight and a half weeks, or, say, sixty days, to two hundred years passing on Earth and Fredworld—the planets are barely moving relative to each other, compared to lightspeed—then we have to be moving at virtually lightspeed ourselves, relative to both planets. Hang on …” She poked at her watch calculator. “Fly, we’re making about 99.99996 percent of lightspeed relative to Earth or Fredworld. At that clip, we would travel two hundred light-years and arrive only thirty-five minutes after the message.” I jumped to my feet. “Arlene, that’s fantastic! They won’t have any time at all to prepare, barely half an hour! Maybe they can mobilize a few security forces, but nothing like a—” “Whoa, whoa, loverboy, slow down!” Arlene settled back, putting her feet up on the table, narrowly missing her half-eaten plate of blue squares. “If it’s actually sixty-one days subjective time instead of fifty-eight, or the planets are really two hundred and nine light-years apart instead of two hundred, that half-an-hour figure is completely inaccurate. And much more important, that was assuming we achieved our speed instantly. But we didn’t… It took us about three days to ramp up, and it’ll take another three days to decelerate; during most of that time, we’re going slow enough that there’s hardly any time dilation effect at all.”

“So you’re saying … so the Fred should have what, six days’ advance notice we’re on our way?” “Hm. basically, yeah. The biggest factor is the acceleration-deceleration time, when we’re not moving at relativistic speeds.”

“So let’s assume they have six days to prepare,” I said. “That’s a hard figure?”

“Hard enough, Fly. I mean, Sergeant. Best we can do, in any event. I’m not entirely sure Sears and Roebuck is giving us good intel on the Fred units of

measurement.”

Six days for the enemy to mobilize wasn’t good, but I could live with it. It was sure a hell of a lot better than two centuries.

I devised a plan, as the senior man present, though Arlene had a few good ideas for booby traps. If the Fred had six days to prepare for our arrival, we had eight weeks! We made good use of the time, practicing a slow, steady retreat down the ship, sealing off segments behind us and activating homemade bombs to wreck the thing. We couldn’t win, of course, not in the long run, but then, as someone once said, the trouble with the long run is that in the long run everybody’s dead!

Well, the bastards would pay for every meter. That was my only goal, and at the staff meeting, Arlene and even Sears and Roebuck regularly agreed with me. I kept us hyped by unexpected alarm drills; Sears and Roebuck figured out how to rig the ship’s computer to ring various emergency sirens and kill power in different parts of the ship. I did the timing myself, keeping the others on their toesies.

Then Arlene got tired of dancing like a puppet on a chain, and she conspired with Sears and Roebuck to simulate a General Catastrophe 101: all the power on the ship dies except for faint warning horns all the way for’ard in the engine room, the computer (on a separate circuit) announces the self-destruct sequence started with nineteen minutes until vaporization, sound effects of a raging hurricane, and the enviros blow enough air across me to simulate a massive hull breech somewhere down south. Scared the bejesus out of me! By the time the ship was down to thirty seconds to detonation, and I still couldn’t find the blessed breech, I was reduced to running in circles like a chicken with its head cut off, screaming and shouting like a raging drunk!

When I recovered my normal heart rate and respiration, I clapped Arlene in irons for the rest of the trip. No, not really, but I threatened to do so, and had she stopped laughing long enough to hear me, I think she would have been terrified.

Sears and Roebuck had a weird sense of humor: they went in for the bizarre practical joke, like somehow attaching sound effects to our weapons. I visited our makeshift “rifle range”—an unused manifest hold with five hundred meters of jagged, saw-tooth corridor and brightly colored markings at the far end—but every damned round I fired went to its doom with a long piercing scream of “heeee-eeeeeeeee-eeelp!” God only knows where S and R sampled the sound effect.

I was stunned when Sears and Roebuck told me and Arlene that the practical joke was the only universal form of humor throughout the galaxy. It was a sad day for me. I had hoped that galactic civilization would have progressed somewhere beyond the emotional level of a thirteen-year-old.

But it brought up an interesting point: was it possible the Freds were simply playing an elaborate and unfunny practical prank on us when they invaded first Phobos, then Mars, then Earth itself? Maybe they considered the humans who fought back to be a bunch of humorless bastards who couldn’t take a joke! “No, that’s without sane,” said Sears and Roebuck. “The practicals are unallowed to damageate the victim or they lose their wisdom.”

“Their wisdom?”

Sears and Roebuck looked at each other; they put their Popeyelike hands on each head and gently pumped each other back and forth, a mannerism that Arlene and I had decided, during the trip, was their way of displaying frustration at our language. “What it is, they lose their cleverness. They are infunny is how you say it.”

“Okay, I get it. Well, joke or not, we didn’t like it, and the Freds are going to find out just how much we didn’t like it when that cargo door begins to grind open.”

Four days before landing, the Fred ship began its automatic deceleration; all of a sudden, we had more than a full Earth gravity for’ard, once again giving us a weird, double-heavy vector toward the outer corner of the room. Arlene did some calculations and figured that the ship was actually accelerating at about ninety-six g’s—that’s what it took to decelerate from

our velocity relative to Fredworld to match orbit in four days! So there must have been the mother of all inertial damping fields to dissipate that force in the form of heat around the ship. We would probably have appeared star-white to an infrared viewer—a big blazing flare warning the Fred of our imminent arrival, in case they'd forgotten.

All good things must come to an end. The night before we were to land, when we still had not been hailed or attacked en route by the Freds, Arlene spent the night nestled in my arms. It wasn't the first time we had spent the night in the same bunk, stripped to our skivvies; some people in Fox Company had never believed us that we never had sex—but it's true. I loved her too much to push for something that she would probably give me, even though she didn't want to, just out of friendship. But that never stopped us from cuddling up when crap got too scary, or when one of us was hurting from a failed affaire du coeur. We held each other tight the night before landing, Arlene's beautiful high-and-tight pressed hard against my blue-shaven chin, as Corps as we could possibly be for our last day—but still needing the warmth of that one human who made it all worthwhile, even the end. And believe it or not, we actually slept well: we had no doubts or nagging fears because we knew we were going out in a blaze of Marine Corps glory the next morning!

Tomorrow came, and Fredworld loomed before us on the for'ard TV monitor. Assuming no color correction, it was mostly brown with straight black lines crisscrossing it at odd angles, with no visible continents, water, or weather, but tons of gunk orbiting around it, sparkling in the sunlight every now and again. Jagged red streaks might indicate intense volcanic activity… "Oh joy," I said when Arlene suggested the possibility.

"We should stay on aboard the ship," said Sears and Roebuck, as if we had rehearsed anything but for the last eight weeks.

"Strap down," I commanded. "The atmosphere is getting thick enough to measure. We might be in for some heavy buffeting, according to the timeline." The Fred computer was no liar. We were shaken around something fierce, and I got seasick almost immediately. I didn't blow, but I sure felt as green as Sears and Roebuck looked. Even Arlene wasn't comfortable, and she never gets motion sick. We hadn't bothered to strap

down the captain’s body, and he was bounced right out of his chair. Oh well, I sure as hell wasn’t about to unstrap to go fetch him. His corpse bucked around the bridge, dropping artichoke leaves in its wake as if leaving a trail for us to follow. I hoped he “felt” every blow, the worthless bastard, however dead aliens “feel” anything! All of a sudden, I heard God’s own crash of trumpets and drums, and the ship wrenched so abruptly, so violently, that I think I passed out; I blinked back to awareness sometime later—don’t know how long—and immediately felt a head-splitting agony, like some Fred or Fred monster was repeatedly jamming its claw into my skull! The searing pain lasted only four or five seconds, then it was gone, but it was another few heartbeats before color rushed back into my vision. I hadn’t even realized I was seeing in black and white until the view colorized again.

Every muscle in my body ached, like two mornings after the world’s toughest workout. My stomach lurched; we were at zero-g again. What the hell? 1 looked to my side, where I could just see a portal: the planet loomed below us, barely moving, drifting slowly up to greet us. I didn’t hear the engines humming. Were we in freefall? What gave? Arlene and Sears and Roebuck started thrashing around, finally coming around to consciousness again. I had no idea what had happened or how we appeared to be landing without engines—the only ones who might have known were the Klave, and they weren’t talking. Arlene started looking around, coming to the same conclusions I had a couple of minutes earlier; we looked questions at each other, then I shrugged and she narrowed her eyes. I didn’t care, so long as we made dirtside—but Arlene would stew over how we had landed for days and days until she figured it out, unless Sears and Roebuck decided to get a whole hell of a lot more garrulous than they had been to date. Unless her serene contemplation were cut short by Fred rays and machine guns. For the moment, at least—a long moment—we ran silently and at peace, probably our last moment of calm before the firestorm of combat. Then, with a groaning thump that sounded as if the entire Fred ship were tearing in half along the major axis, we jerked to a stop on some sort of runway. We had arrived on Fredworld, shaken but not stirred. Quickly, I got my troops unstrapped, and we hustled along to our stations, just in case the Fred fooled us by cutting their way inside without waiting for the doors to open. Nothing happened, and we waited out the landing sequencer. Then, seventy-

five minutes after landing and right on schedule, the cargo door began to roll open, excruciatingly slowly, making a noise like all the Fred monsters in the world screaming in unison. We braced for the impact of the first shock troops.

We waited; we waited; nothing came; nothing pounded, rattled, or thumped up the gangway. We sat alone, each in our assigned spots, ready for action that never came, the war never fought.

I held my breath as long as I could. Then, about fifteen after we should have seen the first swarms of Freds up the gangway, overrunning our first "defensive" position (designed to be overridden, I add), I clenched my teeth to activate my throat mike and clicked to Arlene: click, click-click, click, click… Marine code for "nothing this end how's by you?" The tiny lozenge-size receiver in my ear told me what I was afraid of hearing: click, click-click. Nothing her end, either. Sears and Roebuck didn't have a mike or receiver, but they were with Arlene. I waited another fifteen minutes, querying every two minutes; Arlene responded every time with the same combination: click, click-click. Or is it Arlene? I thought with sudden trepidation. I visualized the monsters overwhelming her before she could signal engagement or fire a shot, subduing her or even … killing her. Behind my eyes, I saw a scaly fungoid finger clicking on the mike, repeating the all-clear over and over.

I gave with a rapid-fire series of clicks, running through nearly half the Marine Corps signal code. Almost immediately, my correspondent responded with the other half—either it was really Lance Corporal Arlene Sanders or one hell of a smart Fred captain. My muscles started to cramp. I stood cautiously, keeping an ear cocked and an eye trained on the gangway. After stretching, I returned to my position: many an ambush has been blown by impatience. But after an hour of plenty of nothing, even my patience was exhausted. If I knew they were coming, just late, I could have waited a week! But more and more, it began to look like we'd been had.

"End operation gather at final rendezvous spot," I clicked to my corporal. Ten minutes of quick walking later, we all met in the engine room. Arlene stared at me as if it were all my fault; she kept clenching and relaxing her

gun hand, rubbing her fingers against her thumb like she were trying to start a fire the hard way. “Okay, buddy-boy Sergeant dude, what gives?”

I shrugged. “There’s no boarding party.” “Gee, you think so?” If sarcasm could drip, I had just had a puddle of it dribbled onto my shoes. I scratched my chin; it was already starting to get rough. In another few hours, I’d have to shave again. Funny, I thought the last time was the last time I’d ever have to do that. “You, ah, want to recon?” Arlene turned to look back over her shoulder, as if she’d heard a noise. I didn’t hear anything. “Recon?” “Yeah, recon: that’s when you go outside and—” “I guess we’d better; we’re never going to sleep again if we don’t.”

I turned to Sears and Roebuck, but they were shaking so hard they were blurry. “We’ll stay here,” they said. “We’ll be out right. We’ll follow you in later time. We’ll stay here until you come back. But we’ll follow you in later time.”

I was a little shocked when I realized that they were speaking separately! I had never seen such a thing before among the Klave, never even knew it was physically possible! I guess that was their equivalent of multiple-personality disorder, or in this case, a feedback loop—they could neither advance nor fail to advance. I expected smoke to come out their ears at any moment, but they disappointed me.

Arlene and I found the emergency engine-room access panel and laboriously hand-cranked it open, then we dropped lightly through, landing with a crunch on Fredworld.

3

As predicted by the timeline program, the ground and air were quite hot and very humid, but we didn't sink into lava or inhale a lungful of hydrogen cyanide. The ship, which evidently had no name, just a number, was so monstrous it looked like that shopping mall in Tucson—used to be in Tucson—that advertised as the world's largest, until the Fred bomb. The beast that had carried us a couple hundred light-years hulked high above our heads, stretching on put of sight in a generally sunward direction, shielding us from the terrific heat.

Sideways past the ship were a series of squarish buildings seemingly built on something soft that had collapsed; they all leaned, one way or another, at crazy angles like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The whole arrangement looked like a demented version of an Earth spaceport. In the other direction was a monstrous condo complex erected roughly like a human graveyard, like headstones arranged in concentric circles. The reddish sky added to the "charm" of Fredworld, its ground that glowed in spots, covered with eight centimeters of black ash.

There was not a single artichoke-head to be seen. A spongy walkway encircled the ship's berth; we cautiously moved onto it, expecting the Fred to come screaming out of the buildings at any moment and fully prepared to instantly retreat to our defensive positions aboard the ship.

For the next eleven hours we searched that damned compound—nearly two thirds of an eighteen-hour Fred day. We found sludge from decomposing leaves littering half the buildings; either they liked walking through sludge or a bunch of Fred were slain so suddenly that no one had time to sweep the place. But then, where were the corpses? "I'm getting a real bad feeling about this," I muttered to Arlene. She said nothing, just tugged on my body armor and pointed back at the ship: after eleven hours, Sears and Roebuck were finally poking their noses out, sniffing the winds to figure out why they were still alive. I was so beat, I didn't even go over and tell them. Let 'em figure it out on their own, I angrily decided! I'd been on my feet

forever, and I wasn’t in the mood to deal with them. Arlene was bad enough. As soon as it became obvious there were no Freds anywhere around—hence, probably very few Freds, if any, on the whole planet, else they would have stormed our ship, even if they had to send for troops—Arlene reslung her weapon-of-choice, a twelve-gauge, semi-auto riot gun made by Krupp-Remington, the RK-150, with 150-round drum magazine. She set off in a spiral search pattern to see if she could figure out what the hell happened. I stood in the shade, panting in the burning heat. Fredworld, at least this part of it, was hot as Hell, 54.5 degrees centigrade according to my wrist-therm. Sweat poured down my face; the perspiration didn’t evaporate in that humidity, especially not under a helmet. I wished I had a standard-issue pressure suit with air conditioning; but we hadn’t made any plans to stowaway aboard a Fred ship, so we didn’t think to bring them along. Space suits we had, courtesy of Sears and Roebuck, but they didn’t help with planetary temperature (I asked).

Sears and Roebuck cautiously approached. As usual, they didn’t seem the least affected by the heat or anything else. They peered around anxiously. “Are they all dead?” they asked.

I shrugged. “Dead or gone. I don’t see any bodies.

Sanders is doing a sweep. We’ll see what she says.” I poked around a little. What I thought was a condo complex turned out to be a series of interconnected buildings, like the Pueblo Indians used to build in caves up a cliff, but these were built into the natural hollows formed by cracks in the ground. I saw what might have been molded furniture, but nothing of a personal nature. Of course, we didn’t have a freaking clue what, if anything, a Fred would consider personal. The buildings were bleached white, like all the color was burned out of them, leaving a pockmarked surface like pumice.

Arlene’s voice jumped at me through my ear receiver. “Fly, I think you’d better come over here. I’ve got a live one.”

“Live?” I asked, flipping up my dish antenna and homing in on her signal—standard armor-issue, very useful.

“Oops, I mean a fresh dead body—maybe we can fix it and revive the bastard, figure out what blew through.”

“What? What?” demanded Sears and Roebuck, obviously hearing only my end of the conversation. “Come on, boys,” I said, setting off at a trot, “need your magic over here.”

I jogged across the compound, turning as necessary to keep the beeps loud and fast. I found Arlene in two minutes, just half a klick distant as the Fly flies. She was crouching over a collapse of pumice stone, out of which stuck one part of a Fred hand and foot. Evidently, it had been unlucky enough to be caught in a building when it fell, thus not getting out in time to be disintegrated or kidnapped or whatever happened to the rest.

Alas, the head was crushed to a pulp. “Damn,” I griped. “Even if we can somehow revive its body, it can’t tell us anything if its brain is destroyed.” Sears and Roebuck knelt to examine the body. “The brain appears intact,” they said, poking at the chest. Duhh! I mentally kicked my butt; I knew they didn’t keep their brains in their heads, but it was hard to remember. Klave didn’t either, as I recalled. “Can you fix it?” asked Arlene. “It’d be icy to know what the hell happened.”

Sears and Roebuck held the body down and drew a cutting laser, casually slicing away the head, legs, and arms. I nearly lost my lunch! The Klave were pretty cold from our point of view; even so, carving up a dead body just for laziness, to avoid hefting heavy stones off the limbs, was a bit much!

They dragged the torso out of the rubble, knocking over a few stray stones with it. I winced with sympathy … even dead, I knew it could feel the pain of every blow. With the body tucked underneath their arms, Sears and Roebuck humped back toward the Fred ship, Arlene and me forming a Goddamned parade behind the macabre Klave pair.

The Freds didn’t divide their ship into separate departments, as humans do; they used something more like an old “object-oriented” approach to space-ship organization: different sections, like different counties, each had their own essential services—food, water, navigation, engines, and medical

equipment. God only knows how they divvied up the workload; maybe they fought for it! But Sears and Roebuck wandered around with the Fred body until they found a batch of machines that they claimed were “MedGrams,” tossed the torso inside, and began poking blue and red buttons on a control panel. A couple of hours later—I watched, but Arlene went to sleep on one of the beds—the torso was flopping around, trying to move its nonexistent arms, legs, and head.

“Great,” I said, “but now what? It has no mouth; how can it tell us anything?”

“Vocoder,” said Sears and Roebuck, speaking for the first time since finding the body. They clipped a tew more leads onto the chest of the Fred, palmed a touchplate, and a mechanical voice sounded through the speakers.

“… DARES STAND AGAINST THE MIGHTY … WHO DARES THE DEMONS OF UNBEEADED SUNLIGHT WHO FOOLISHLY TEMPTS THE… PEOPLE OF THE DARK AND THE HOT THE PEOPLE OF THE CRACKS OF—”

Sears and Roebuck turned it off. They fiddled with the settings and played it again, this time all in a weird language that made my teeth ache—presumably Sears and Roebuck’s own language.

Arlene had jerked awake at the first noise. She stared wildly, still trying to cold-boot her brain and figure out who was just shouting.

“Pretty impressive,” I said. “How did it know English?”

Sears and Roebuck stared at me as if I were a particularly slow child. “Fly, you and Arlene have been talk around English for eight week now. What you did think the compu-nets were doing?” I got a creepy feeling in my gut, like a couple of poisonous centipedes had got loose in there. “You mean that thing has been listening to every word we say? Jesus.”

Arlene looked around nervously. “Has it been … watching us, too?”

“Sometimes.”

“Even when … during my private moments, in the bathhouse?”

“Sometimes,” admitted Sears and Roebuck, adding nonchalantly, “we spent time observing you two, too. We are curious how you mates if you will demonstrate use of your mate apparatus.”

Arlene turned red as a radish; I’m not kidding! For years in the Light Drop, she had showered around men, used the toilet (or the ground) in front of men, and even had sex with Dodd in front of the guys when she got drunk once … and here she was flushing fire-engine red at the thought of an alien and a computer having seen her naked! I couldn’t help laughing, and she glared M-14 rounds at me.

“Need to find tuning,” muttered Sears and Roebuck, fooling with the buttons. I stared, reminded of about a thousand and one cheesy sci-fi movies that Arlene regularly made me watch while she gave running commentary about which star’s sister was the mistress of the head of Wildebeest Studios. (“Jeez, it’s Dr. Mabuse,” whispered Arlene in my ear.) “Try question them now,” suggested Sears and Roebuck, pretending for their own peace of mind that there were really two Fred aliens instead of one. As a double-entity, Sears and Roebuck never had been able to deal with beings other than in pairs, pairs of pairs, and so forth: they had no trouble dealing with Fly and Arlene, but when it was Fly and Arlene and Captain Hidalgo, Sears and Roebuck threw a fit! I cleared my throat. “State your name for the record,” I began, just trying to provoke some response from the Fred.

“I will be Ramakapithduraagnazdifleramakanor—” “You will henceforth be designated Rumplestilt-skin,” I decided. Damned if I were going to try to repeat that horrible squabble of sound! “Rumplestilt-skin, I am Taggart. You may also be questioned by Sanders and by Sears and Roebuck. You will answer all questions, or we’ll leave you immobile on the planet surface forever.”

“Rumplestiltskin responds. What if he answers questions from the Taggart?”

“You’ll be disintegrated and your spirit will be sent wherever it goes upon disintegration.”

“Rumple bumple mumple humple …”

“Do you accept the terms?”

“Rumplestiltskin answers questions. Bumple.” I sighed. I had to keep reminding myself we were peering directly into the brain of a Fred—a Fred that had lain dead for God knows how long, slowly going mad.

In fact, that was a good first question. “Rumplestilt-skin: how long have you lain beneath the rubble?”

“Rubble bubble wubble tubble—”

“Rumplestiltskin will answer the question!” “I—I—I—I—I—Rumplestiltskin answers questions. Rumplestiltskin lay for 19,392 suns.” Arlene tapped at her watch calculator again. “This planet rotates four hundred and twelve times per orbit, so that’s forty-seven Fredyears plus twenty-eight Freddays.”

“What’s that in dog years?” I asked.

“For us, that’s about forty years, six months.” “Jesus. Rumplestiltskin, were your people attacked nineteen thousand suns ago?”

“Whack smack back crack whack smack back crack ”

“Who attacked you?”

“Newbies soobies.”

“Was it a new species? Rumplestiltskin, how did you meet your attackers?”

“Rumplestiltskin’s people met the news on their own world we expand our great empire we conquer all we shall pound the Others into hotrock.” I closed my eyes, sorting through the Fred’s tangled speech. Arlene whispered into her throat mike, so I alone heard her speculation: “Fly, think

they found a new species on its own planet, and somehow it ended up attacking and destroying the Fred home planet?" I grunted affirm; that was what I had figured from the yammering. But there were some real problems here; Sears and Roebuck had made it pretty clear that most species took millions of years to get from civilization to spaceflight—humans were such an exception that we caught the Fred by surprise. They first discovered us about four or five hundred years ago, while Spain and Portugal were still sailing out in wooden wind-driven ships to map the "New World." The Fred confidently assumed we were tens of thousands of years away from being able to offer any effective resistance.

They didn't like us; they feared us because we, of all the intelligent races known in the galaxy, could die. They decided to exterminate us—another move in the megenia-long chess match for control of the galaxy. In the battle between the "Hyperrealists" and the "Deconstructionists," we played the role of Kefiristan, the poor unsophisticated farmer in whose back-yard a minor skirmish is fought.

Hyperrealists, Deconstructionists—the terms were courtesy Sears and Roebuck, who searched long and hard through Earth philosophy and decided that wacko, effeminate, limp-wristed literary critics in New York were the finest, most refined philosophers of the bunch. What a kick in the nuts: this great, grand political war between two mighty empires turned on a doctrinal difference of aesthetics between two competing schools of literary criticism. Billions of lives hung in the balance between one dumbass way of dissecting "eleven fragment stories" and another, both of which missed the point entirely, of course. That much, Sears and Roebuck told us, but no more. I had no idea what the hell that meant; eleven story fragments? But try telling S and R that. His species, the Klave, were members of the Hyper-realist long; the evil Freds represented the slimy, dishonorable Deconstructionist tong. Someday, somehow, I was going to beat those sons of bitches, Sears and Roebuck, into explaining the whole damned thing to me. In the meanwhile, I just shrug and thank God we soldiers don't have to understand politics in order to follow orders.

Anyway, the Freds miscalculated … catastrophically. When they returned to Fredworld, raised an invasion force (taking about a century to do so), then

returned, a mere half a millennium had passed—but to the Freds' shock, they found not a planetful of ignorant, superstitious farmers and sailors, but a technologically advanced, planet-wide culture with missiles, nuclear weapons, particle beams, spaceflight, and a brain trust unfrightened by horn and fang, scale and claw.

Even after Arlene and I kicked their asses, when we left Earth, humanity was on the ropes … just like the old heavyweight Muhammad Ali. We played rope-a-dope with the "demons," and if Salt Lake City and Chicago were nuclear wastelands, so were the Fred bases on Phobos and Deimos. Worse, the last remnants of Fox Company—not only me and Arlene but Albert and our teenage hacker Jill—had managed to rescue the former human, now cyborg, Ken Estes, which gave us the potential to tap into the Fred's entire technology base. The Freds were genetically engineering human infiltrators, but we were training einsatzgruppen.

God only knew what was going to happen, since we left Earth right at the exciting part. Or what had happened already, actually. I had to bear in mind that by the time we could return to the mother planet, four hundred years would have passed!

The Freds made a critical miscalculation when they assumed humans evolved at the same rate as everybody else in the galaxy. Was it possible they made the same mistake again, this time to far more disastrous consequence?

Time to get a bit more specific with Rumplestilt-skin: "When you found the Newbies, what was their technological level?"

"Techno tackno crackno farmer harmer—" "Were they industrial or agricultural?"

"Culture vulture nulture—"

"Rumplestiltskin will answer. Were the Newbies technological?"

"Evils! We came to herd as they herded we came to harvest as they harvested we came to wander as they wandered we came to herd as they

herded!" Herding… harvesting—nomads? Farmers, just discovering animal husbandry? I prodded the undead Fred for another half hour, eliciting little other information. The best I could tell was that the "Newbies" had evidently just discovered agriculture and ranching; they were just settling down from their nomadic life when the Fred scoutship observed and studied them. They made contact with the Newbies and fought a few skirmishes, just probing them. The Freds returned to Fredworld; this was probably three hundred or more years back, just around the time the first Fred expedition returned from contact with Earth. The Freds horsed around for a while, not long, then they returned to the Newbie system, just a couple of hundred years after they left… only to find that the Newbies had gone from the beginnings of agriculture to a heavily armed, spacefaring culture in just two centuries!

And that's where Rumplestiltskin started to get hazy. The rest of the interrogation was long, tedious, boring, tedious, dull, and tedious; even Sears and Roebuck lost interest and started monkeying with the navigational system … which was unlocked, now that we'd reached the preprogrammed destination. I figured Sears and Roebuck had never interrogated a prisoner before; it's not a process for the impatient. I got a story, but I had no idea whether I got the story. This is what I finally dragged out of old Rump, with me and Arlene making a lot of intuitive leaps and filling in the background as best we could: when the Freds arrived at the Newbie planet, ready to take the "empty" square in the giant chess game between the Hyperrealists and the Deconstructionists, they discovered a weird, unknown piece on the board. The Newbies must have an accelerated evolution that is as fast compared to us humans as we are compared to the rest of the galaxy! The Newbies were so stellar that they tore through the Fred fleet like a cat through a fleet of canaries.

And then—this was the part neither I nor Arlene really bought, though it was such a lovely thought it was hard to resist—the Newbies backtracked the Freds and invaded Fredworld itself, utterly annihilating it in revenge for trying to conquer the Newbies! What a beautiful picture—the Freds, in a panic, desperately defending their homeworld against an unknown foe who had been herding sheep and building twig-and-wattle huts just two (subjective) centuries before! Arlene and I laughed long and loud at that

one. Sears and Roebuck must have thought we were loons, since the Klave have nothing remotely like a “sense of humor” defense mechanism; they just look at each other.

The last part of the story I got was the creepiest:

Rumplestiltskin insisted, over and over, that those damned nasty Newbies were still here. But where? Sears and Roebuck began yanking their heads back and forth again, expressing some sort of emotion only a Klave could understand. “What are you on about?” I demanded, still stewing about the missing Newbies.

“We have faxed the injuns,” declared our compatriot. “To where would like you to go?”

Another hour had passed, and neither Arlene nor I had gotten another intelligible word out of Rumple-4 stiltskin. “What do you think?” I asked Arlene. “Has he fulfilled his part of the bargain?”

She pursed her lips. “I can’t think of anything else to ask. We’ve hit a brick wall in every direction now.” Arlene inhaled deeply, then swallowed a nutrient pill. “Yeah, Fly, I guess he’s done what he agreed. You going to burn him?”

I shrugged. “I promised—deal’s a deal.” Gingerly, I reached across and pulled all the connections from the torso of the Fred. I looked across at Sears and Roebuck, but they had completely lost interest, their long arms reaching all around the Fred navigational unit, the one in this district of the ship, and disconnecting and reconnecting fiber-optic cables. “You, ah, know where there’s a Fred ray?” The Fred ray was the last-ditch weapon that they used against us when we rampaged through their base, and later their ship; it was some sort of particle beam weapon, much better than ours. Arlene had inventoried the weapons on the Fred ship, including seventy-four Fred rays; she took me to the nearest one, leaving me to drag the torso behind.

Turning my head away, praying to avoid vomiting and completely humiliating myself in front of my friend and subordinate, I balanced the torso on a neutron-repellant backdrop, the only thing that would stop the

beam. The body fell over, and I set it up again. Then I stepped back and cranked the weapon around to point at the Fred's chest, where it stored its brain.

"Man, I don't like doing this," I muttered. "Fly, he's been trapped dead underneath that rubble outside for forty years. One eye was open—remember?"

"So?"

"So for four decades, Sergeant, Rumplestiltskin stared unblinking at the ground or the sky or the sun, knowing his entire species had been wiped out in the wink of an eye by an alien race they were going to enslave. Fly, he's suffered enough; don't trap him inside that corporeal bottle."

My hands started shaking as I inserted a jerry-rigged pair of chopsticks into the holes to press the levers, simulating a Fred hand.

Arlene put her hand on my shoulder. "You want I should do it?"

I shook my head firmly. "No, A.S., didn't you read Old Yeller when you were a little girl?" "No, I was too busy reading Voyage to the Mushroom Planet and The Star Beast."

"When your dog has to die, Arlene, you've got to shoot him yourself. You can't get someone else to shoot Old Yeller for you."

I pressed the lever, completing the connection. As usual, we saw nothing. That was the part that bothered me the most: as destructive as this neutron beam was, you'd think you would see something, for God's sake! A blue light, a lightning bolt, fire and brimstone—something. But the beam was as invisible as X-rays in the dentist's office, and as quiet; all I heard was a single click, and suddenly there was a huge hole through Rumplestiltskin's chest. Within three or four seconds, its body was boiling, the flesh vaporizing instantly wherever the beam touched. I slowly burned away the entire torso. The Fred ray was a gigantic eraser—everywhere I pointed, flesh simply vanished. A minute after turning on the beam, I clicked it off; nothing remained of the Fred but an invisible mist of organic molecules in a

hot ionized plasma state. My guess was the interrogation was pretty permanently over.

“Okay, kiddo,” I said to A.S.; “let’s go Newbie hunting.”

We suited up for combat, and for the first time in God knows how long, I found myself getting the shakes. Somehow, I’d thought the Freds would have burned all the fear out of me, leaving nothing but a cold husk of sociopathy. Not true. At the thought of going up against whatever it was that plowed the Freds into the dirt on their own home turf, my hands trembled so much I couldn’t even StiKro my boots on tight.

“Stay here and keep the engine running,” I told Sears and Roebuck.

“You want to start me the engines?” they asked, confused.

“Just a figure of speech, you dufoids,” Arlene explained. “But run through the launch sequence up to just before engine start.… We may have to book if we stumble onto a whole nest of them.” Sears and Roebuck looked at each other, Alley Oop and his mirror image; they seemed perfectly content staying aboard the ship and letting the Marines do the dirty work. I sealed up the helmet and pressed the other armor seals tight; it wasn’t a pressure suit, but in a pinch, we could survive a few minutes in hard vacuum. I noticed Arlene’s face was whiter than its usual English pale; she must have figured the odds the same as I.

My breath sounded loud in my ears as we edged down the gangway onto the surface of Fredworld again. The landscape looked eerily alive through the night-vis flipdowns, tinted green but combining infrared, radio emission, and visible light enhancement. I turned slowly with a microwave motion detector; nothing moved around us, unless it was over the jagged mountains on the horizon.

“This isn’t good,” I said over a shielded, encrypted channel to Arlene. “Shouldn’t there be some life, even if the Newbies killed all the Freds?”

“Maybe they couldn’t tell which were Freds and which were animals, so they fragged everything. Maybe they used a nuclear bomb, or some kind of

poison or a biovector.”

I grunted. “Doesn’t seem likely that they’d manage to get absolutely every living thing, does it?” “There’s another possibility, Fly: maybe there are living animals, but they’re just not moving.” “Animal means moving, Arlene, like animated.” She didn’t answer, so I started a spiral sweep, mainly watching the outer perimeter. After three hours of recon, I was starting to regret being so nice and burning Rumplestiltskin’s mortal coil, setting free his soul. “If that bastard lied to me—” “You’ll what?” came Arlene’s radio voice in my ear. “Resurrect him and kill him again?”

“Maybe we should resurrect the Freds on the ship. Whoops, don’t correct me; I just figured out how stupid that suggestion was.” I managed to catch her while she was inhaling, or else she would have quickly snorted that the Freds on the ship knew even less about the Newbies than we—we had already killed them before we left for Fredworld, a hundred and sixty years before the Newbies landed!

The weirdness of the place was starting to get to me. I kept seeing ghosts in my peripheral vision, but there was nothing when I whipped around with the motion detector. “Damn that Rumplestiltskin! He swore they were still here!”

“Maybe he just meant they were here when he died?”

I paused a long time. “Arlene, if that’s all he meant, then we’re in deep, deep trouble. I don’t think you realize how deep.”

“I don’t get you. If we can’t find them, we jump back in the ship and return to—to Earth.” She didn’t say it, but I knew she was thinking to a dead, loveless Earth with no Albert Gallatin.

“A.S., if we don’t find the Newbies, I can almost guarantee they’re going to find us. They’ll find Earth. We were almost wiped out by the Freds. We barely hung on, and only because we evolved so much faster than they, we were so much more flexible—because they underestimated us! What the hell do you think would happen to humanity if the Newbies found us next?”

“Jesus. I didn’t think—”

“And if they can go from stone plows and oxen to—to this in just two hundred years, where are they going to be just ten years from now? What if they don’t find us for fifty years, or a hundred years? Jesus and Mary, Arlene; they would be gods.”

She was silent; I heard only my own breath. I almost considered asking her to switch to hot-mike, so I could hear her breathing as well, but I couldn’t afford to lose control now, not when I had troops depending on me. Above all else, I had to demonstrate competence and confidence.

“Fly,” she said at last, “I don’t like this. I’m getting scared.” She wrapped her arms around her chest and shivered, as if feeling a chill wind or someone walking across her grave.

“Maybe we can pick up some trace from orbit.”

“After forty years?”

“Maybe Sears and Roebuck has some idea.” Yeah, right. Sears and Roebuck never even heard of the Newbies until just now, and if they had that hard a time understanding us and our evolutionary rate—

Jeez, how could they even imagine the Newbies and what they might mutate into? “Let’s head back,” I decided. “We’re not doing anything out here but scaring the pants off of each other.”

Arlene nodded gravely. “Kinky,” she judged. I heard a strange, faint buzz in my earpiece as we headed back toward the ship … sounds, voices almost. I could nearly believe they were whispers from the Fred ghosts, desperately trying to communicate—perhaps still fighting the final battle that had destroyed them. I was now convinced that there was not a single artichoke-headed Fred left intact on that planet, except for the corpses we brought with us—corpses we would never revive. In fact, I decided to leave them behind on Fredworld; the temptation to wake me dead, just tor someone to talk to, might be too great, overwhelming our common sense and self-preservation.

But the notion of ghosts wasn't that far-fetched. Since their spirits never died, where did they go? I began to feel little stabs of cold on the back of my neck, icy fingers poking and prodding me. Jesus, shut off that imagination! I commanded myself. "Huh?" Arlene asked, jumping guiltily. "Criminey, Fly, are you a mind reader now?"

I said nothing … hadn't even been aware I spoke that last thought aloud; curious coincidence that it turned out to be perfectly appropriate. . The ship was so huge that it was hard to recognize it as mobile; it looked like an artificial mountain, three-eighths of a kilometer high, over a hundred stories —taller than the Hyundai Building in Nuevo Angeles—and stretching to the vanishing point in either direction. The landing pad was barely larger than the footprint of the ship, clearly built to order. Weird markings surrounded the LZ, the landing zone, burned into the glass-hard surface by an etching laser, either landing instructions or ritual hieroglyphs. They looked like they once had been pictograms, now stylized beyond recognition.

"You know, Fly, we've never actually walked all the way around this puppy."

"I know. I've been avoiding it. I don't like thinking of how big this damned ship really is." Arlene sounded pensive, even through the radio. "Honey, Sergeant, I've had this burning feeling—" "Try penicillin."

"I've had this burning feeling that we have to walk this path, walk all the way around what's going to be our world for the next nine weeks, or however long it takes until we finally get… home."

I stared back and forth between the obsidian LZ and the ship door, torn. "You're right." I sighed. "We ought to reconnoiter. Arlene, take point." "Aye-aye, Skipper," she said, voice containing an odd mixture of elation and anxiety. She unslung her RK-150, and I flexed my grip on the old, reliable standard, the Marine-issue M-14, which contrary to the designator was more like an updated Browning automatic rifle than the Micronics series of M-7, -8, -10, and -12. These were heavy-lifting small arms, and the Freds were pretty pathetic when not surrounded by their "demonic" war machines. I don't know what we expected to run into on Fredworld; nothing good, I suspected.

I thought about calling Sears and Roebuck and telling them what we were doing, but we were right outside. If they wanted us, they could call their own damned selves. Still feeling that chill on the nape of my neck, I followed Arlene at a safe twenty-five meters.

It was hard not to be awestruck next to that ship. It was hard to credit; the Freds could do this, and they couldn't even conquer a low-tech race like humanity! They always taught us at Parris Island that heart and morale mattered more than tanks and air support in combat: look at the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan and Bosnia, at the Scythe of Glory in Kefiristan. But this was the first time I really believed that line: we really wanted the fight, and the Freds were unprepared for resistance.

The ship was gunmetal gray along most of its flank, except where micrometeorites had scored the surface or punctured it. Thank God for self-sealing architecture; at the speeds we traversed the galaxy, cosmic dust sprayed through the ship like bullets through cheese.

We reached the aft end and stared up at the single, staggeringly huge thruster. The ship was a ramjet, according to the specs: as it moved at increasing velocity relative to the interstellar hydrogen, an electromagnetic net spread out in front of the boat, scooping up protons and alpha particles and funneling them into the "jets," where the heat from direct conversion of matter to energy turned the hydrogen into a stream of plasma out the assend. No other way could we accelerate so near the speed of light in only three or four days.

The thruster at the back looked exactly like a standpipe. I kid you not; I caught myself looking for the faucet that would turn on the water. We rounded the stern and headed for'ard again.

About a kilometer from the stern, we found it—we found our first, and only, Newbie body. Arlene saw something and jogged forward; I dropped to one knee and covered her, watching her through my snap-up rifle scope. She ran under the ship, finally having to crouch and skitter sideways for the last couple score meters; this close to the ship, the underside looked like a building overhang where it rose away from the cup-shaped LZ.

“Jesus,” she muttered. “Sergeant Fly, get your butt up here and eyeball this thing.”

“What is it?” I asked, trotting toward her position at port-arms.

“I’d rather you saw it for yourself without preconceptions.” She sounded tense and excited, and I double-timed the pace.

By the time I approached, I was panting. Jeez, what adding another stripe does to a Marine’s physical fitness! Arlene didn’t look tense; her RK-150 hung off her back totally casual. She was staring at something underneath the ship, where you’d have to crawl on your hands and knees to see it. She shone a pencil-light on the thing; it looked like a body of some sort, or was once … but definitely not a Fred. “Hold my rifle,” I said, handing it to her. “I’m going under and take a look.”

She eyed the overhanging ship uneasily. “You sure this thing isn’t going to roll over on you?” “If’n it do, li’l lady,” I said, doing my Gunny Goforth imitation, “we-all gwan be inna heap’a troubles.” The ship overhung us even where we stood, stretching a good fifty meters beyond us; if it chose to roll over, we’d be squashed like a bug on a bullet anyway, no matter where we stood.

But I sure didn’t like crawling under the thing; I could feel the mass of immensity over my back; I got about ten meters in when I experienced a rush of utter, total panic. I’d never felt claustrophobic before! Why then? The ship felt like an upside-down mountain balanced on its peak, ready to topple over and crush me. I froze, unable to move, while waves of panic battered me. The only thing that kept me from turning around and crab-crawling back out of there was the fact that Arlene was staring at me, and I would rather die than have her think a sergeant in the Marine Corps was a screaming coward.

After a minute, the panic subsided into gripping anxiety; it was still horrible, but now bearable. “Are you all right?” Arlene called from behind me. “Y-yeah, just trying to f-figure out what the thing is. Gotta git a lit… get a little closer.” I forced myself to crawl until I was as close as I could get. I set up my Sure Fire flashlight-lantern to illuminate the body while I

inched forward until my head was caught between the spongy material and the ship's hull. It was amazing, a scene straight out of The Wizard of Oz: when the Fred ship touched down, it landed right on top of a dead alien! It definitely wasn't a Fred; this creature looked more like an alien is supposed to look: white skin, long multiple articulated arms and legs, fingers like tendrils, not like the Freds' chopsticks or Sears and Roebuck's cilia. I swear to God, this thing actually had antennae, even. The eyes were huge, big as the cross-section on an F-99 Landing Flare, and Coca-Cola red; I couldn't quite see, but I think they continued around the back of the head. The face was turned toward me, and I got hot and cold chills running up and down my spine, like it was staring at me and demanding why? The mouth was a red slit, and there was no nose—dark lines on the sides of the face, where the cheeks would be on a human, might have been air filters.

My heart started pounding again, another wave of panic; I was staring at my first Newbie—I just knew. After I calmed down a bit, I slithered sideways, through my light; it was a bad moment when I eclipsed the light, casting the Newbie into total shadow. God only knew what it was doing in the dark. I got far enough to the side to see the body and legs. "You know," I yelled back, my voice still shaky, "this thing doesn't look half bad. It's crushed a little, but I think it could be salvageable."

Arlene yelled something back that I couldn't hear, then she got smart and spoke into her throat mike instead. "Can you drag it out if I throw you a rope?" "I bet I can," I responded. I was never a rodeo roper, but I'd been around a calf or two in my day. I grew up on a farm and worked the McDonald's Ranch when I was a kid. "Throw me the rope, A.S. I bet I can lasso that thing and drag it into the light of day. Kiddo, I think we may have gotten our first lucky break on this operation."

We carried our gruesome trophy back into the ship, plopping it down on the table right behind Sears and Roebuck. When they turned, they stared, eyes almost popping out of their skulls. "What that is?"

5

“I was hoping you could tell us,” I grumbled. I had gotten used to Sears and Roebuck’s galaxy-weary, we’ve-seen-everything-twice pose; I was even more shocked than the Magillas themselves at their confusion. “Are you saying this is an entirely new race of beings you’ve never seen before?”

“No,” they said, “and whatever disgusting is it is. The color is all wrong and the eyes are something horrible. Where did you get it?”

“Ship fell on it,” explained Arlene. “Could this be a Newbie, the race Rumplestiltskin was on about, the guys that wiped out the Freds?”

“Well something outwiped the Fred, that is sure,” said Sears and Roebuck. “If there no other life forms of life here, then is logically that is the Newbie.” “Great, fine, cool,” I interrupted, “but can you revive the bloody thing?” I jabbed a meaty finger at them. “And don’t hack off any arms or legs this time! You turned my stomach with what you did to Rumplestiltskin.”

Sears and Roebuck didn’t answer. Instead, they grabbed an ultrasound and an X-ray and began mapping the gross anatomy of the Newbie. After half an hour of building up a reasonable 3-D model in the data stack, they dragged the heavy corpse into a ring that looked like it was made of bamboo—probably some sort of CAT scan or Kronke mapper that the Fred doctors used.

Arlene and I kicked back and talked about old sci-fi movies we had watched. She thought the creature looked like the aliens in Communion, but I held out for a giant-size version of the things from E.T. Finally, an hour and ten minutes into the examination, Sears and Roebuck suddenly answered, “Yes.” It took me a moment to figure out they were answering my original question. “Say again? You’re saying you can revive it?”

“We can revive them if the other half you find.” “Other half? S and R, this thing was alone under there … that’s all there is; it’s not a double-entity like you.”

They stared at me for a few moments, but I’m not sure they really got it. Sears and Roebuck were Klave, and the Klave were always paired … always paired. Normally, they couldn’t even deal with individuals—they literally couldn’t see them! If you were alone, they would usually see a phantom second person; if you showed up as part of a triad—A, B, and C—the Klave would see three pairs: A and B, B and C, A and C … something we found out before Hidalgo bought it on the beam-in.

But Sears and Roebuck was—were?—an ambassador of sorts, and lately they’d gotten much practice coping with singles. Even so, sometimes they forgot. They looked offended and pained. They lugged the corpse to the operating table and began the process of first figuring out what had “killed” the Newbie, then fixing it; that was all it took to revive anything in the galaxy … except a human being.

Sears and Roebuck spent a long time hunting for organic damage, finding nothing; at last, they announced the mystery solved: the Newbie had died of malnutrition! Evidently, it had been left behind accidentally and eventually ran out of dietary supplement pills. As its last action, it went and lay down right on the LZ, hoping to be found and revived, and that was what nearly got the thing scrunched flatter than an armadillo on a tank tread. Another few meters to one side, and splat!

Alas, that was a tough problem to cure. None of us had any idea how malnutrition affected Newbies. Sears and Roebuck did a biochemical analysis and thought they had isolated the essential nutrients. They compared them to what you could find on Fredworld, figuring out what was missing, then they had to guess what systems that would destroy. The upshot was that Arlene and I were ordered to take a hike for a day or two; we spent it exploring the ship, mapping all the “object-oriented” divisions of the ultraindividualist Freds. Strange, I never in my wildest nightmares thought I would be fighting along-side the ultimate collectivist Klave to defeat the ultraindividualist Freds! But a Marine is not there to make policy, just to enforce it.

We checked back frequently. I wouldn't put it past Sears and Roebuck to revive the Newbie without bothering to wait for me and Arlene. But at last they said they were ready. They had been washing various organlike objects in a nutrient bath, running a low-level electrical current through them for two days. Now they jump-started the hearts with big jolts of electricity, and the damned thing moaned, flapped its arms, and sat up—alive again, oo-rah.

The Newbie slowly stared at each of us, especially curious about Sears and Roebuck; it made no attempt to escape, attack, or even step off the operating table. I guess it figured we were unknown quantities—best not to rile us just yet.

The thing started picking up our language from the moment we revived it. I asked Arlene whether she had me covered, and the Newbie had all the vocabulary I used (Arlene, name; you, me, pronouns; covered, guarded with a gun) and half our language structure (interrogative, expression) down cold in six seconds. I started asking it simple questions; after the second or third one, it was answering in good English, a lot better than Sears and Roebuck had ever managed to learn. An hour after reviving, we were having an animated conversation!

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Newbies."

Thanks a lump. "Not you as a species, you as an individual… What is your name?"

"Newbies."

I shook my head. There was some sort of confusion, but maybe it was just the language. "All right, Newbie, what did you do to the Freds, to the ones who were here before you?"

"They were broken, but we couldn't fix them."

"How were they broken?"

The Newbie stared unanswering for a moment; I figured he was calculating the time factor. “Eleven decades elapsed between contacts by the Freds, and they had not grown to meet the circumstances. We expected to surrender and seek fixing, but they were broken and had to be fixed.”

“We found a Fred here who said you destroyed them, wiped them all off the face of the planet. Why did you kill him and his buddies?”

“What is a Fred?”

“A Fred! The Freds!” I waved my arms in exasperation. “Why did you kill them?”

“We are not familiar with a Fred. The Freds were broken; they did not grow to meet the circumstances. We attempted to fix them, but it was beyond our capabilities. We eliminated them from the mix while we studied the problem. The next time we encounter such a breakage, we shall have grown.”

The Newbie sat rigidly still on the operating table, arms hanging limply at its sides, almost as if they were barely usable. Probably the result of being dead and imperfectly revivified, I guessed. “Do you attempt to fix all races that don’t, um, grow to meet the circumstances?”

“We have never encountered other races before. Until we grew, we did not realize we were a planet; we thought we were the world.”

“Why did the Newbies leave you behind?” “We are the Newbies. We don’t understand the question. We require further growth or fixing.” “Why are you, you personally, still here on Fred-world? Why aren’t you with the Newbies?” “Your syntax is confusing us. We are here and we are there.”

Oh criminey! Another freaking hive culture. The Klave were bad enough, being able only to see pairs and powers of two (pairs of pairs of pairs)… now these Newbies didn’t even understand the concept of an individual member of a species.

“We must withdraw to consider your information,” I said. “Newbies, please wait on this table and elsewhere.”

“Newbies will wait.” The Newbie closed its eyes … and all life signs ceased! The machines giving their steady thuds with every beat of each heart (three—one in the groin area, one in the stomach, and a smaller one circulating blood through the head) fell silent, and a rasping buzz sounded as respiration and body temperature plunged.

I stared. Had something inside the Newbie’s stomach moved? I leaned close, staring, then I thought about that grotesque movie from the late 1900s and the thing popping out of the chest, so I stepped back warily. But something inside the Newbie was definitely on the move; it rippled across the alien’s belly from east to west, slithering around. “Sears and Roebuck,” I called, “did you pick up any large parasites or symbiotes that might be using the Newbie as a host?”

Sears and Roebuck looked at each other, hands on heads in agitation. “No,” they said, “definitely nothing there was that produces such a motion could produce.”

“Jesus, Fly, what’s happening to it? It looks like it’s being eaten alive! Is it dying?” Arlene and I split, stepping to either side of the Newbie, weapons at the ready. The snake or worm or whatever it was pressed up against the Newbie’s stomach, bulging out the flesh; Arlene and I backed up a step, thank God—when the belly burst, blue-gray Newbie blood or fluid sprayed across the sickbay, splashing the wall and even spotting my uniform slightly.

A gray serpent slithered through the opening … but the true horror was that the serpent had six heads! Then I blinked, and the scene abruptly changed: it wasn’t a six-headed serpent; it was a tentacle with six prongs, or “fingers,” at the end. It lashed about uncontrolled for a few minutes, falling limp at last. The Newbie opened his eyes. “Are you finished considering our information?” He seemed not at all perturbed by the new addition to his anatomy; in fact, he didn’t even remark on it.

I tried to think of a subtle way of asking what the hell was going on, but Arlene beat me to the line, demanding, “How the hell did you grow a tentacle out of your gut?”

The Newbie looked down in obvious surprise. “We aren’t sure what event has stimulated this growth.” “It’ll come to you, I’m sure,” I muttered, “but we’re not quite finished considering your information. Please excuse us.”

The Newbie became rigid again, and its vital signs dropped away to zero. I stepped back and spoke for Arlene’s ears only—presuming that the Newbie hadn’t evolved super-sensitive hearing in the last five minutes. “We are in deep, deep kimchee, kiddo.” She looked up and down. “Oh, come on; we can still take it.” Her red brows furrowed, then raised. “Oh! You mean we Earthlings? Yeep, I hadn’t even thought of that. Damn.”

Newbies, hundreds of millions of Newbies, scouring the galaxy looking for races to “fix,” evolving so rapidly that they were a whole different species from one battle to the next. Newbies with a violent streak sufficient to wipe the Freds from the face of their home planet. Newbies discovering the embryonic human race, just beginning to poke our noses into the intergalactic fray—these were frightening thoughts. Arlene grimaced and absently tugged at her ear, following her own agitated turn of thought.

“Fly, we have to find them. We have to find out which way they’re headed and warn Earth.” “What is Earth by now? Maybe we deserve wiping out… who knows?”

Now she turned the brunt of her blue-eyed, icy anger on me. “I don’t think I follow you—Sergeant.” “Just thinking out loud; don’t pay any attention. Course we’re going to warn the country, or what’s left of it, whoever’s in charge. I just wonder; it’s been two hundred odd years back home; it’ll have been another two centuries before we can get back, maybe longer, depending on where the Newbies lead us. I just wonder whether there’s still anything left worth warning.”

I didn’t know how much of the conversation Sears and Roebuck had heard —little, I hoped. I stepped forward and spoke aloud, rousing the Newbie.

“Newbies, attention please. Take us to your—to the rest of you, please. Can you do that?”

It opened its eyes and spoke but did not otherwise move. “We can take you to us if we have not changed our plan for exploration. We are going to [unintelligible], but we do not know where we will go from there.”

“If we leave now,” Arlene whispered in my ear, “we’ll still arrive about forty years after the Newbies arrived, no matter where it is.”

“Can you give—ah, the Klave bearing and distance to your location?”

The Newbie turned to Sears and Roebuck and spoke in a different language. And the latter responded in the same tongue! Arlene and I stared at each other; when had the Newbie learned to speak Klavish? Then she rolled her eyes and solved the mystery: “Learned it from the Freds, of course.” It probably wasn’t Klavish, actually, just some common language the two sides, the Hyperrealists and the Deconstructionists, used for interparty negotiation. Sears and Roebuck turned back to the local navigational system. Evidently, in the absence of conflicting orders from any other section of the ship, any one station was sufficient to pilot the entire vessel. “Voyage taking us another eight of weeks, it will,” announced the pair of Klave. “External times in the hundred and twenty of years.”

Eight more long weeks … God, just what I wanted. I took a deep breath. “Push the button, Max,” I said. Arlene gave me a swift kick in the ankle. The lift sequence was bizarre. It took a full day, much of which was a carefully calculated refueling that the ship carried out automatically after Sears and Roebuck programmed the course. Arlene interrogated the Klave extensively on just how the launch itself worked, then briefed me, like a good junior NCO. On their homeworld, the Freds used something Arlene called a “pinwheel launcher,” which she described as a huge asterisk in orbit around the planet. Each limb of the asterisk was a boom with a hook attached; the diameter of the asterisk, counting the booms, was something on the order of seven thousand kilometers!

The whole pinwheel affair rotated directly opposite the day-night rotation of the planet. The spokes of the pinwheel descended from the sky and just

kissed the ground; at that precise point, ground and boom were moving exactly the same speed and direction … so from the viewpoint of a ship on the runway—our ship—the boom appeared to hesitate motionless for a moment.

That was the moment that our ship attached itself to the boom; in that fraction of a second, the Fred ship transformed itself from being a member of the Fredworld system to a member of the pinwheel system. Then, as the pinwheel continued to rotate, it pulled our ship up with it… gently at first; it felt like zero-g for a few minutes. Then we felt the centrifugal tug as we were yanked in a different direction than the planetary rotation.

The g force increased rapidly, then just as suddenly, it decreased as the inertial dampers kicked online. Still, my stomach flew south while the rest of me went north, and I longed for the comfortable, familiar disorientation of mere zero-g! That was a first, I was absolutely convinced—Fly Taggart longing for free-fall!

The pinwheel carried us up and around, then at perigee, the highest point of our little mini-orbit around the center of mass of the rotating asterisk, the ship decoupled, launching us into space. We were once again at freefall, and I regretted my earlier wish for it. But the ship immediately started spinning up, eventually hitting 0.8 g again. Meanwhile, the engines began to whine and moan and loudly groan, and we felt the hard backward push that indicated we had started our long acceleration, prior to the seven-week drift, culminating with the hard deceleration at the other end, dropping us into … into what? It was a frightening thought. And we would have fifty-eight creeping days to think about it.

We fell into a standardized shipboard routine: training, mess, watchstanding, strategic mental improvement (we played chess and Go), and endless worrying, discussing, theorizing, emotional reminiscence of all that was best on Earth before this whole, horrible nightmare started. Once again, I took to walking the long, wet, slimy, hot corridors … but this time with Arlene at my side.

Everything we saw reminded us of the monsters the Freds created for us; they drew heavily from their own world. They loved dark alcoves, doors

that opened suddenly with only a hiss for a warning; I couldn't count how many times I whirled around, drawing down on a frigging door!

Horrible bas-relief faces adorned every flat surface. Then, right in the middle of a passageway on a space ship, for Pete's sake, we'd run into a fountain of some dark red fluid that sure as hell looked like blood. The walls never seemed quite straight. Maybe straight lines and right-angle turns bothered the Freds as much as the crazy geometry set my neck hairs upright. "Take a look," Arlene said, pointing at a door through which we had to pass.

I sucked in a breath. "The mouth of Moloch? Jesus, Albert should be here."

I looked sharply over at her, but she wasn't torqued by the reference to her once and only. She nodded slowly. "Albert would have loved this spread." That was Arlene Sanders: her response to grief and fear was literary irony. A perfect Marine.

Jesus, I felt homesick. Just a few months ago—my time—I was wasting my life at Camp Pendleton, loafing and pulling the occasional watch, thinking of not reupping and dropping back into the world instead. I had a fiancee, now deceased; I had parents and high-school friends; I had the expectation that the world would look pretty much the same twenty years later. Then we got sent to Kefiristan, but even that was all right; it was crap, but it was the crap I'd always known was possible in my chosen profession. But when they yanked us out of the Pearl Triangle and boosted Fox Company up to Phobos … well, they yanked me out of my comfortable reality and threw me into primordial chaos. So now I was jogging the length and circumference of an alien spaceship, hurling toward an unknown star at nearly lightspeed, with a plural alien as ally and a mutable thing for a guide; the only constancy was Arlene Sanders, now my last and only friend.

It's not just a job, man, it's an adventure. The weeks crawled past like worms on a wet side-walk. Every few days, the Newbie mutated, evolved, whatever you call it, slowly transforming from the roughly humanoid shape we first found into a truly alien form with a distended stomach, a pushed-in jaw, and longer arms. I found the change fascinating and a little scary; who was to say it wouldn't evolve into something we couldn't handle?

But a queer thing happened: the closer we got to the planetary system, which we nicknamed Skinwalker because it was where we would find the shape-shifters, the more frightened the Newbie became. He was scared, terrified!

I asked what he was so frightened of, and he answered, “We are subject to different stimulae; we are frightened of how we have grown to adapt to the native circumstances.”

“You’re scared you’re no longer the same species!” I accused. The Newbie said nothing, going limp again—its usual response to information it could not handle. Of course it couldn’t… I had just suggested that unity was bifurcated, that what had been one was now two! The Newbie had no words inside its head to explain that concept: it conceived of itself as everything and nothing … all of the Newbie species at once and nothing of itself. How can you divide “everything” into two piles, one of which is still labeled “everything”?

The Newbie was starting to realize that whatever was waiting for us on Skinwalker was not the Newbie race—not anymore. It was terrified of what its own people had become, just as Arlene and I were terrified of what Earth would look like when we finally returned.

We hawk-watched the Newbie for the first couple of weeks, but it never did anything but sit on the table, unmoving, and answer questions we asked it. It never initiated conversations or tried to move. We surveilled it, watching through an air-circulation grate to see what it did when it thought no one was around; either it didn’t do anything or else it knew somehow that we were there. Sears and Roebuck told me that there was a hidden video system aboard the ship, used by the captain to spy on the rest of his crew, but we couldn’t find it, and we had thrown most of the Freds overboard on Fredworld, so we couldn’t revive the captain to tell us himself… even if that idea weren’t so utterly stupid that I wouldn’t even mention it to my lance.

Gradually, we came to accept the immobile, silent alien in the sickbay, then we started even to forget he was there at all. I found myself and Arlene casually talking in front of him about stuff he really wasn’t cleared to hear.

After all, he was still the representative of the enemy, even if he and they had evolved in separate directions for forty years, which was the equivalent of possibly forty million dog years. Five weeks into the eight-week voyage, Arlene experienced every Marine's worst nightmare: something terrible happened on her watch. The first I knew about it was three hours later, when she shook me awake out of a fitful sleep, where I dreamed we landed in a sea that turned out to be one, humongous Newbie circling the planet, waiting to fold us gently in arms like mountains and drag us to a watery grave fifty fathoms down. "Get up, get up, Fly," she said urgently. "Battle stations!" In an eyeblink, I was out of bed, stark naked, with a .40-cal pistol in my hands.

"What? Where?" I demanded, looking for the enemy. We were alone in the room we called the barracks; even Sears and Roebuck were missing, though they'd been there when I went to sleep.

"Fly, I screwed the pooch. Real bad." She looked so pale and stricken that I almost reached out to hug her. It wouldn't have been appreciated; there were times she was a friend and times she was a Marine Corps Lance Corporal.

"What did you do, Lance?"

Her face took on the mask, what we wear when we have to go report a dereliction of duty (our own) to the XO: stone cold and icy white, lips as taut as strings stretched to their breaking point. "Sergeant, I was on watch at 0322; I went to check on the prisoner in sickbay, but he was gone."

It took a moment for the intel to sink in. "Gone? What the hell do you mean? Where did he go?" I glanced at my watch, the only thing I wore: 0745. The Newbie had been missing for at least four hours and twenty minutes.

"I can't find him, Sarge. I've looked … Sears and Roebuck and I have crawled this entire freaking ship up one side and down the other, and we can't find a shred of evidence that he was ever here!" "Where are the Klave?"

“They’re still looking, but I think if we were going to find the Newbie, we’d have found traces at least by now.” She lowered her voice and looked truly ashamed; it was the first time I had ever seen her like that, and I didn’t like it. “I think he’s, ah, been planning this break for a long, long time—weeks, probably.”

I pulled on my cammies, T-shirt, and jacket while she talked. “God, Arlene, you’re asking me to believe that the Newbie sat utterly still without moving for five weeks, just to lull us into a false sense of security! Christ, do you realize how ridiculous that sounds?”

“It’s what he did, Fly. I just know it.” We conducted a rigorous search, but, of course, if the person being sought doesn’t want to be found, it’s not difficult to avoid four people—well, three actually, since Sears and Roebuck are inseparable by nature—on a ship with fifty square kilometers of deckspace. We finally gave in to exhaustion at 1310 after more than five hours of continuous searching. The son of a bitch didn’t want to be found, and by God we weren’t going to find him.

If he was even still a him, or a Newbie, for that matter, what weird mutation had he undergone this time? I shuddered at the horrific, Hieronymus Bosch images conjured up by my mind.

Then abruptly the ship’s “gravity,” the acceleration toward the outside hull, shifted radically. Suddenly, down was not just out but forward as well. Only one event could have caused that effect… and it meant we had found our elusive gremlin, sort of: “Criminentalies, he’s made his way to another set of nav controls!” I shouted in Arlene’s ear; he was slowing us down or turning us, driving us away from Skinwalker and sabotaging the mission!

This Newbie had evolved an independent personality… and he was determined not to risk contact with the tribe, no matter what the cost to the rest of the galaxy.

“Christ, S and R—do something!” Having issued my first military command in a week, I did what any good military man does when confronted with an invisible enemy: I ran in circles, screaming and

shouting. Sears and Roebuck looked frustrated, being constitutionally unable to follow the order “do something.”

Then Arlene, whirling rapidly in every direction with her magazine-fed shotgun, thought of the obvious: “Fly! Isn’t this stupid Fred ship steered by consensus?”

“Yes! I don’t know what that means!”

6

“Maybe S and R should hump over to another nav center and issue another vote for our course!” Sears and Roebuck started to run, but I grabbed one of their arms. “Wait—before you go, set up a computer loop that continually issues the command to get us back on course … run from nav to nav, setting up the same order wherever you can. Go!” I gestured Arlene to me. “Okay, Lance, you and I are going hunting.” She licked her lips; sometimes that girl is just a little too Marine.

The gravity stopped, then reversed; we had out-voted the Newbie. But while we broke out into one of the outer corridors and ran the length of the ship, the situation reversed, and again we started slowing. The damned Newbie was doing the same thing we were! “Arlene—how many navigational centers?”

“Um … forty-one that I counted.”

“Corporal, that thing has evolved intelligence beyond ours. We can’t outthink him, so there’s only one thing to do: we have to drag him down to our level by attacking without thought or planning, purely chance encounters and brute force.”

We bolted through corridors lit only by our own flashes, dashing from nav to nav at random—random as a human brain can do—desperately hoping to catch the Newbie as he visited nav after nav. We ran into Sears and Roebuck—twice! But the Newbie remained as elusive as ever.

The third time we bumped into the Klave and nearly blew them away, I had had enough. “Screw it, A.S.—just start pounding a shell into each nav center as we find it.”

It was time to reduce the choices. We went methodically from center to center, and in every room, Arlene raised her semi-auto shotgun and pumped three or four shells into the delicate programming equipment. Everywhere

we went, we tripped over dead Freds that we didn't even remember killing (and hadn't got around to dumping), so intense had been that firefight when we took over the ship. We had destroyed more than half the navs and had been hurled to the ground a dozen times by radical acceleration changes when we finally kicked a door and saw our enemy. The Newbie had his head buried in the guts of one of the destroyed navs, trying to repair it enough to cast another vote for slow-down. He jerked his new triple-heads up as we entered; his tentacle-arm snaked down the circuitry, bypassing the damage.

"There is no need for violence," one of the heads said, speaking in calm, measured tones. "We must join forces against the Freds. The Newbies have decided they cannot coexist with the Deconstructionists. If you continue on the present course, we will be wiped out by the Newbies, who have their own agenda. Please, just listen to us!"

He started to make a whole lot of sense. Arlene lowered her shotgun hesitantly, waiting to hear him out.

So I shot the frigging bastard before he could utter another syllable. I raised my M-14 and squeezed off a burst of four, the big rifle kicking against my shoulder like a Missouri mule, disemboweling the Newbie where he stood. Arlene stared. "Jesus, Fly" was all she said, her voice tentative and questioning. The Newbie staggered back against a hydraulic pump—God only knows what use the Freds had for hydraulics in a spaceship—but it didn't clutch its belly or moan or gasp "ya got me!" or anything. It bled, the blood being pinkish white, like pale Pepto-Bismol.

A bulge started in his side. I understood immediately—it was evolving more organs to relink around the damage! I blasted them, too, and at last the damned thing truly died … as nearly dead as the living dead ever could be. It bubbled softly, leaning back against a bulkhead, then nothing.

Yeah, but I'd seen that act before. I unloaded the rest of the magazine into him, hitting every major biological system I could imagine. I guess maybe I went a little overkill; but, criminey, what else could I do?

“A.S.,” I explained guiltily, “he was getting under our skin. I had to do it! If I’d have let him speak, Lance, he would have had us eating his solid waste in five minutes flat.”

“I… understand, but—Jesus, Fly!”

The Newbie slid slowly to the ground, staring at me with such intensity I almost reloaded and shot another burst into its face, just to shut those eyes! I didn’t. But for the first time, I really understood the protagonist of Poe’s “The Telltale Heart.” He turned his head to the side, staring down at the deck. I think he was already “dead,” unable to control his neck and eye muscles, but I still know he saw what he saw. They all did.

“Jesus was a man of action, Corporal.” I was getting a bit offended at her taking of the Lord’s name in vain. Maybe I was just a bit worried that Jesus might not have liked what I had just done. “I had no choice … his tongue was silver!”

She just stared, shaking her head. The ship continued to accelerate back to cruising speed, giving us two “down” directions: outboard and aft. I felt sick, but I didn’t know whether it was from the weird “gravity” or being sick at heart about what I had just done—blown away the only representative we had met from an entirely new alien species.

We found Sears and Roebuck and told them they could stop programming navigational centers. We were alone. The Newbie’s ghost could join that of Rumplestiltskin and every other dead Fred on board. We picked up the creature’s body, bearing him aft to the “bridge,” just about midway along the ship’s body; actually, this bridge was just one among many. We set him up in the co-pilot’s chair, where the Fred captain had been slain. Enemies in battle, they could become fast allies guiding the ship of death with spectral hands. The Newbie weighed more than I would have expected, about twice what Arlene weighed. I wished the nav cabins were closer to the central core of the ship, so we wouldn’t have to lug the dead thing through nearly a full g of acceleration. This marked the second time in living memory when Fly Taggart ever wished for zero-g!

We ramped up to speed again, but the monkeying around had cost us ten days of travel and a dreadful amount of fuel. I didn't understand how two hours of space-jockeying could cost us ten days until Arlene explained the fuel problem. The fuel was calculated on two assisted accelerations: ramping up at the beginning of the journey, after being launched by the pinwheel launcher from Fredworld, and slowing down at the end all by our lonesome.

I mostly nodded and said "uh-huh" whenever she paused to wait for my response. I was really only interested in one aspect, which she finally disgorged. The ramscoop only worked at a certain speed, and you had to accelerate to that speed by other means … hence, the hydrogen and liquid oxygen fuel we carried. The hydrogen was no problem; the ship replenished the store as a byproduct of fusion—I guess not all the hydrogen fused, or something. But the LOX, as Arlene called it, was irreplaceable—once it was gone, it was gone.

The bastard Newbie had used a lot of it trying to slow us down. We didn't have enough left to do a hundred-g burn for three days and match orbits with Skinwalker. We would have to start slowing a subjective week earlier by shutting down the ramjet fusion entirely and just letting the friction of interstellar hydrogen against the ramscoop slow us some. Then we would manually burn at lower thrust, conserving our fuel and hopefully matching velocities… If not, we either would stop short, dead in space, drifting at whatever velocity relative to the planet we finally ran out of fuel, sailing on past the planet and waving bye-bye in the rear windshield—or else we might plow into the hunk of rock at a couple of hundred kilometers per second, punching out a crater the size of the Gulf of Mexico and, incidentally, atomizing us and the ship.

It all depended on Sears and Roebuck. Arlene and I offered to help—we told them about our brilliant piloting of the makeshift mail-rocket coming down from the relocated Deimos moon to Earth's surface—but the Klave just looked at each other, each putting his gorilla-size hand on the other's head, and pumped their crania up and down. We took it to be laughter that time—derisive laughter.

I had no idea how good a pilot Sears and Roebuck were, but I had a bad feeling it was like the President taking the stick of Air Force One when the pilot has a heart attack. Better than giving it to the presidential janitor, though, which was basically where Arlene and I stood in the pecking order. God, how I wished we hadn't left Commander Taylor back at the Hyperrealist military base! That babe could fly anything. The other big problem was that unlike back at Fredworld, we had no friendly pinwheel launcher to catch us here and lower us more or less gently to the surface. We were entirely on our own.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, including the extra ten days of grace. We trained and practiced various emergency drills, just for something to do: one of the biggest problems with spaceflight is the incredible, relentless boredom, but if there's one thing the Marine Corps teaches you to handle, it's ennui. We were always sitting on our hands, waiting for somebody further up the food chain to finish a mysterious errand, while the rest of us jarheads, men with stripes on our sleeves, waited for The Word. It wasn't like they let any grass grow under our feet. There's always something to do around a military base, even if it's just putting a nice polish on the brass cannon on the stone steps at Pensacola (or scrubbing the base CO's hardwood office floor with tooth-brushes). If you manage to "miss" your gunny or your top, you might find yourself with a whole afternoon free, but there was always the NCO club to soak up any extra dollars.

On the Fred ship, it was both more and less difficult to find something to do for weeks and weeks—harder because there weren't any butterbars, silverbells, or railroad tracks to tell us what to do, but easier because we were on an alien space ship full of strange and wonderful things to poke and monkey with, three main corridors of 3.7 kilometers each at 0.8 g and one at zero-g.

I actually learned to tolerate zero-g for several hours at a time with only a slight floaty feeling in my stomach. Arlene loved it, naturally. The central shaft that I called the zero-g corridor was dodecahedral, according to A.S.—it had twelve sides. But the corners weren't sharp, they were rounded off, and the sides were not very symmetrical in any case. Like everything else in Fredland, the entire corridor disoriented me, like looking at one of those

paintings by Picasso where the eyes are head-on, but the nose is in profile. There was a totally cool red pulse that traveled the length of the shaft—from back to front, oddly enough—that reminded me so much of an old sci-fi flick that we dubbed it the Warp Coil Pulse. The walls must have been light panels or LEDs or something; I don't know where the illumination came from … there was no source that we ever found. We invented a few reindeer games to play when we got tired of training, marching, and drilling. (I made sure Arlene and I kept up on our parade and close-order drill; we may have been lost in space, but we were still the United States Freaking Marine Corps, Goddamn it!) One Arlene got from an old sci-fi book by Heinlein: you start at one end of the corridor and "dive" toward the other end, doing flips or spins or butterflies or some other gymnastic feat, seeing how far you can get and how many maneuvers you can perform before you crash against the side. She never did get all the way, but after the first couple of weeks, I always did, much to Arlene's annoyance. I thought Sears and Roebuck would be too staid and respectable to join in any reindeer games. Hah! They were always the first to get tired of the milspec crap and demand we go play. I guess decadence is more than anything else the need to play games to drive away the boredom demon.

Having demonstrated their insanity by volunteering to go on our expedition, far from any possibility of resurrection if they should "die," Sears and Roebuck proved their fearlessness in the risks they would take just for a thrill. Once, they put on space suits from their fanny packs, climbed outside the ship, and played like monkeys on the outer skin! They dangled from the spinning hull, swinging from handhold to handhold with their feet dangling over an infinite abyss—one slip, and we would have lost one, if not both, of our pilots. Probably if one had gone, the other would have been unable to contemplate living and would have followed the first loyally to a horrible doom.

But all good things must end. The time rolled by at last, and Sears and Roebuck suddenly turned deadly serious. We shut down the ramscoop, and I felt a slight gravity push for'ard as we plowed into inter-stellar hydrogen-dust and slowed. We did this for about a week, then Sears and Roebuck started the thrusters at a lower and more efficient level of acceleration than what our ship originally had planned. It made no difference to us; it was

still far beyond the fatal crushing level, so the inertial dampers kept it down to the same level we had felt ramping up. Our reindeer games stopped; we had no more zero-g shaft. Suddenly heavy again after weeks of acceleration ranging from 0.8 g down to zero, I dragged every footstep, and my legs and back ached. Arlene didn't have it so bad, since she didn't mass as much as I; she still had a spring in her step and an increasingly grim smile on her face. I knew the feeling; it had been months since I killed anything. After what the Freds had done to my life and my world, I developed the taste for blood. Now that the Newbies had deprived me of my rightful revenge, I was prepared to transfer all that wrath to the new threat.

In short, I wanted to pump a few rounds into a nice, smooth Newbie chest. But I was also starting to get very, very nervous about what they had managed to evolve into in the four decades they had been down on the planet we approached—assuming they were still there. I saw a number of possible outcomes, none of them pleasant: the frustration of finding no one, the humiliation of capture, the agony of us being annihilated.

Then without warning one day, the reactor braking suddenly stopped, sending Arlene and me flying (literally, the for'ard bulkhead that had been a deck became a wall instantaneously, dropping us to the outer bulkhead, which now was our only "floor"!). "We're coming in down to landing," Sears and Roebuck soberly informed us, then used the last of the hydrogen peroxide retros over the space of an hour to cut the ship's rotation, leaving us in an orbit that would take us directly into the planet's atmosphere … at about mach seventy (that's Earth sea-level, dry-air mach speed of seventy, about twenty-three kilometers per second).

Trying to land at such a speed would kill us as surely as blowing up the reactor pile. But we were rapidly running out of options: when Sears and Roebuck killed the main thrusters, they did so with only a tiny bit of LOX remaining. "How much we got left?" Arlene asked.

"Approximately it is left 650 seconds is," they answered, "but only at three gravities of Fredworld for using the maneuvers rockets."

Arlene and I looked at each other; that was less than eleven minutes of burn, and without even using the huge main thrusters! Arlene tapped rapidly

on her wrist calculator, frowned, and tried the calculation again. “S and R,” she said, broadcasting through her throat mike into the ship’s radio communication system. “I get a net drop of about mach fifty.” “That is correct in essential.”

Arlene lowered her orange brows and spoke slowly, like a child answering what she thinks might be a trick classroom question. “Sears and Roebuck, if we’re doing mach seventy now, and we drop by mach fifty, doesn’t that mean we’re still doing mach twenty?” “Yes. The math are simplicity.”

Now we both looked back and forth in confusion. I took over the interrogation, now that I understood the situation: “S and R, you braindead morons, we’ll still be splattered across the deck like a boxload of metallic atoms!”

Long pause. Maybe they were manipulating each other’s head in that faintly obscene form of laughter the Klave use. “No my childrens, but for we shall use air-braking to reduceify the rest of the speed.” A terrible pit opened in my stomach. Even I knew that the Fred ship was not, repeat not, designed to be abused in such a fashion. It was designed to dock with a pinwheel launcher and even to land gently using the main thrusters to slow all the way to next to nothing … not to belly-flop into the atmosphere like a disoriented diver, burning off excess speed by turning its huge surface area directly into the onrushing air! We would burn to a crisp. That is, if the ship didn’t tear itself into constituent parts first. “Hang on to yourselves and things,” suggested our mondo-weird, binary pilots. “We’re burning away the fuel starting now.”

The ship jerked, shimmied like a garden hose, jerked again. “Where the hell’s that crazy mofo?” I demanded.

Arlene was knocked away from her perch by another sudden “earthquake.” I caught her by the arm, so she didn’t carom across the zero-g ship. “Christ! I think he said he was headed toward Nav Room One, right inside the engine compartment!” The ship twirled like a chandelier, or so it felt; we dangled from handholds, feeling sudden acceleration trying to yank us free to fling us into God knows where. Nearly eleven minutes later, the acceleration vanished as abruptly as it began. Sears and Roebuck finished

the final burn. We were dead-sticking it the rest of the way in, and that would be the end of the Fred ship—and possibly of us, too.

Then the atmosphere thickened enough that we started feeling a real push; the bow of the ship became “down,” the stern “up.” I drifted against the for’ard bulkhead, now floor, with about 0.2 g, which quickly escalated to full, then more than full gravity. Two, three times our normal g! The inertial dampers were offline, probably out of juice; we suffered through the full deceleration phase. Four g’s, four and a half.

7

The air-braking went on forever. I was crushed to the deck by about eight hundred pounds of weight! Then the gravity began to slide along the deck toward the ventral bulkhead. Sears and Roebuck were pitching the nose upward to expose more of the hull to the atmosphere.

We shed airspeed even as we gained more weight. I heard a horrific explosion astern of us—the ship swerved violently, hurling us across the new floor! Arlene fell against me, but I was stunned. I shook my head. “What the freaking hell—!”

She stared out a porthole, face ashen. “Jesus, Fly! Freakin’ ship splitting!” She slid her hand along the deck and pointed. I just barely saw a huge piece of the Fred ship below us, tumbling end over end, shattering into “tiny” splinters scores of meters long. It was getting hard to talk. We needed all our breath to bear down, forcing blood back into our heads. Thank God we were lying down—at now six g’s, sitting up we might have passed out. I knew what was happening: the Fred ship, strong as it was, was never intended to burn through the atmosphere like this! It was fracturing along heat seams, separating into the components that had been attached by the Freds when they assembled the vehicle, probably in orbit. The damned thing was way too long for this sort of monkey crap.

“Forward!” I shouted, nearly blacking out with the effort. Arlene stared, confused—lack of oxygen-bearing blood in her brain, maybe—so I repeated, “Forward! Nav Room One!”

If any component of the ship was to survive the fiery reentry, it would be the biggest, strongest section—the decks and compartments where the engines actually burned, shook, and vibrated. Besides, if that section went, we would all die anyway—no pilot! We weren’t far from it, maybe a couple of hundred meters. But it was a marathon! Arlene strained and slithered forward, like a snake; I tried to follow suit, but the best I could do was a humping motion that wrenched my back something fierce. God, to be

young again, and supple. The monstrous gravity squeezed us to the ventral deckplates like an enormous boot stamping on our backs. Each compartment was connected to the next by a flexible rubber bottleneck that could easily be sealed to isolate a puncture. The rubber mouths became jaws of death, smothering and suffocating us as we wriggled through them. We could have used some petroleum jelly; I had plenty … about a kilometer behind us in my seabag. After the first four rooms, my muscles were so sore I grunted with pain with every meter crawled. Arlene was crying; I'd almost never seen her cry before, and never from sheer physical pain. It scared me —the world was ending!

The groans from the ship as it tore itself apart sure as hell sounded like the end of the world, the universe grinding down noisily … long drawn-out moans, a loud noise like the cry of a humpbacked whale, shrieks and sobs, the wailing of the damned in hell, gnashing their teeth. The devil himself danced around me in hooves and pointed tail, laughing and capering, pointing at me in my mortal distress. Or was it a hell prince minotaur? A horrible hallucination; my Lord, I surely did see him, in flesh of red and reeking of sulphur and the grave. Then a steam demon and a boney leapt through the walls! Old home week for Fred monsters!

But I knew where salvation lay, for'ard, for'ard to Nav Room One. When Arlene faltered and tried to lie down and die in front of me, I put my hand on her flattened derriere and shoved with a strength I'd never felt before. The handful of ass moved ahead, dragging the girl along with it.

Another four rooms, only two left. My belly and chest were scraped raw, and my groin ached with the agony of a well-placed jackboot. Spittle ran down my chin, smearing on the deck and dehydrating me. We suffered under a full eight g's then, according to my wrist accelerometer, and even my eyeballs throbbed with pain, horribly distended toward the deck. Color had long since disappeared, and even the black and white images I could still see narrowed to a tunnel of light. Blurry outlines bent and twisted under the force. Again, the ship skewed, spun out of control until Sears and Roebuck regained control. How the hell were they flying the ship? Were there even any control surfaces left?

We shoved through the last two rubber collars; I almost died in the second when my bulk stuck fast, and I couldn't breathe for the clingy seal across my mouth and nose. Arlene saved my life then, reaching back into the bottleneck, somehow mustering the strength to drag me forward by my hair a meter, clearing the rubber from my face. At last, we lay on the floor of Nav Room One, broken and bleeding from nose and ears, unable to see, hugging the deck like drunks at the end of a spree.

I heard sounds above the shredding of the ship behind us, words—Sears and Roebuck saying something. Desperately, I focused. "Being—shot." They gasped. "Shot at down—defenders shooting—ship breaking into part—loosing controlling." Shot? Shot at? What the hell was this outrage? It was just too much, on top of the agony of reentry, to have to put up with this weaponry BS as well! "Kill—bastards," I wheezed. Ho, fat chance; more likely, we would all die before the ship even hit the ground—blown apart by relentless defenders with particle-beam cannons.

I passed out, only for a moment; I woke to hear Sears and Roebuck repeating over and over, "Dirt alert! Dirt alert!" I opened my eyes, focused just long enough to see the ground rushing up like a freight train, then went limp and dark again. I composed my epitaph: Goodbye, cruel alien world.

Sears and Roebuck must have flared out at the last moment, for I felt the nose rise majestically. Then the remaining tail section of the Fred ship, whatever was left, struck the ground with particular savagery, and the ship slammed belly-first into what turned out to be silica sand. A miracle that proved my faith—had it been granite or water, we would have been atomized. We were still traveling at least mach four when we painted the desert, and we plowed a twenty-seven-kilometer furrow across the surface of the planet, kicking up sandy rooster tails taller than the Buchanan Building in the forty seconds it took us to slide to a stop.

When the landing was over, we lay on the deck panting and gasping. Sears and Roebuck were out; they were used to a lot heavier gravitation than we, but that shock was a bit much even for them, being seated in the pilot's chair. The ship's safety procedures performed as advertised, shedding pieces of ship well back over the horizon to dissipate the energy, while

protecting the for'ard compartments of the ship, where the most precious intelligent cargo would have clustered.

Arlene was already sitting up on her butt when I awoke; her head was back as she tried to staunch a pretty bad nosebleed. I tasted a lot of blood, but it was a few seconds before I realized I had lost my left, upper, outermost incisor. I vaguely looked for it, still somewhat groggy, but it was nowhere to be seen. I started to blink back to conscious awareness. Arlene saw that I was awake. Without lowering her head, she croaked, "I guess—that wasn't —the world's greatest landing."

Holding my jaw, which had started to throb, I had time to mutter a Marine definition: "A good landing is anything you walk away from." Then the pain really hit me all over, and I was busy gritting my teeth and stifling screams until Arlene kindly injected me with a pain suppressor and stimulant from her combat armor medipouch.

Sears and Roebuck woke up, little the worse for wear. "Shall we to outgo and face the new brave world?" they cheerfully asked. It was the closest I'd ever come to fragging two of my own men.

8

“Livable?” asked Arlene, her voice hoarse and painful to hear.

Sears and Roebuck grunted. “Justice a minute, justice a minute.” They tapped at several keys on the command console, hmming and humming as the few sensors that had not burned off in the crash sampled the air, the radiation levels, the temperature, and looked for any dangerous bacteria, viruses, molds, or other microorganisms. “Not to kill,” they announced at last.

“Healthy?” I gasped.

“Not to kill.”

Their irritating evasiveness put me on my guard, but what could we do? The ship’s air seal was ruptured, and we soon would be sucking down Skinwalker’s air, whether we wanted to or not. The machinery that manufactured the nutrition pills was back a kilometer in the ship and was probably smeared across the landscape. So we would soon enough be eating local food and drinking local water, if there was any—or dying of thirst and hunger. Our combat suits would serve as a limited shield against radiation, but they would only mitigate, not negate the ill effects. For good or ill, we were cast upon the shores of Skinwalker, offered only wayfarer’s bounty. God, how poetic. We would either be able to digest the local produce or die trying.

We picked ourselves up off the floor, painfully peeling the deckplates away from our skin. Arlene wasn’t hit as hard as I—less mass per surface area. Our armor was pounded hard, protective value probably compromised but still better than zip. Despite their chipper words, Sears and Roebuck had a hard time peeling themselves out of the command chair (which had survived remarkably intact). Arlene let me lean on her shoulders, and our pilots supported each other, as we limped to the emergency hatch. I pulled

the activation lever. Explosive bolts blew outward, taking the hatch cover with them.

Shaking, we climbed down the ladder, two hundred meters or more. It was a straight shot, not staggered the way human ladders generally are: if one of us were to slip… I nervously watched Sears and Roebuck above me, but I shouldn't have worried; their legs may have been ridiculously short, but they were powerful—all due to the high gravity of the Klave homeworld. Arlene and I were more likely to slip and fall in the relatively modest gravity of the planet, about 0.7 g.

The world looked like the Mojave Desert, or maybe we just happened to land in a desert area. I hadn't gotten much of a look during the crash. I looked up. The sky was too pale, but I saw oddly square clouds, almost crystalline; we had weather, evidently. Bending down, grimacing, I lifted a handful of sand: the grains were finer than Earth sand, fine enough that I decided Arlene and I should wear our biofilters; really, really fine silica can clog up your alveolae and give you something like Black Lung Disease. Thereafter, we spoke through throat mikes into our "lozenge" receivers. I don't know what Sears and Roebuck did when I pointed out the problem; they had their own radio.

The brownish gray sandscape depressed me. Under a pale sky, the only spots of color were the green and black of our standard-issue combat suits and Sears and Roebuck's muted orange flightsuits, which they had worn ever since the mission began. Everything else was the color of dingy gray socks that hadn't been washed in a month.

"Okay, S and R, what the hell did you mean about us being shot at?" My tongue couldn't help exploring the new hole in my mouth, where the tooth had been; the hole still throbbed, but the sharp pain was gone. Gotta get S and R to fix this, I promised. "Meaned what was said; they were firing at us shots from cannons."

"Energy weapons, artillery shells, what?" Extracting usable information from Sears and Roebuck was worse than sitting through a briefing by Lieutenant Weems—may he rest in peace for a good long time. "Were firing the slugs from the electromagnabetic accelerating gun."

“Um, a rail gun?” asked Arlene, picking up on the answer faster than I. Anything to do with exotic technology or weaponry was A.S.’s subject—she could lecture for hours on ogre tanks and orbiting “smart spears,” and she sometimes did.

“Yes, the rail gun,” confirmed Sears and Roebuck. I sort of knew what a rail gun was: you took slugs of depleted uranium, encased them in a ferromagnetic shell casing, and accelerated them to several kilometers per second velocity using electromagnets. The resulting “gun” could damn near put shells into orbit—they moved so fast, they punched through any sort of imaginable armor like a bullet through thin glass. It was a horrific weapon we had never been able to make work properly. The first shot always destroyed the target, but generally also our rail-gun prototype!

I licked dry lips. If the enemy—Newbies or Freds?—could build a tactical-size version, our combat armor would be utterly useless; if we ever took a shot, we’d be toast.

The desert was evidently deserted; but the solitude did not begin to compare to the vast loneliness of the starry void. I stared at the desolation, taking some comfort in the feel of ground beneath my feet, the breath of wind against my armor. The air smelled tangy—ozone—but so far I was breathing all right. “Hey S and R,” I called, softly under such a sky, “is that ozone from our ship, or is it natural to the atmosphere?”

“We didn’t detect it orbitally,” they answered in unison. I shrugged. If any of us had asthma, it might have been a problem. But I never had any, Arlene’s was cured by the doctors at NAMI, and Sears and Roebuck could take care of themselves.

“Which way toward the dinks who were shooting at us?” Arlene asked. Sears and Roebuck turned slowly through the entire 360-degree panorama, then pointed basically along the twenty-seven kilometer trench our ship had dug. Arlene turned to me, raising her brows like a pair of question marks. Toward or away from danger? Didn’t seem to be much of a choice. S and R had detected no signs of civilization on the planet—no powerlines, power-plants, canals, or structures larger than two or three stories. If there was anything smaller, it wouldn’t have shown up on their quick microwave

scan. So far as I could tell, the only sign of intelligent life was the gun battery that had pounded our ship into rubble. Oh, what the hell! “Let’s at least eyeball the wogs and see who they are. My guess is they don’t belong here any more than we do.”

The air temp on the desert Arlene dubbed the Anvil of God was livable; Sears and Roebuck hadn’t lied. But they never claimed it was comfortable … and 60 degrees centigrade certainly didn’t qualify. Our helmets kept the direct sunlight off our heads, and we had several days’ worth of water if we used the recirc option, pissing into a tube and recycling it back to the drinking nipple. Arlene was not happy about doing that. Being a female, this meant she had to strip and pee into a bedpanlike device, whereas I just wore a sheath. There were no trees, so no privacy. She could have turned her back, but in a typical act of defiance, A.S. just did it right in front of me and the Klave. I pretended nonchalance, as if women urinated in front of me all the time—Arlene had done it before, anyway, in combat situations. But in reality I was shocked and embarrassed every damned time … but I sure wasn’t about to let Arlene know that! I would never hear the end of it.

We cut off the furrow about two klicks laterally and paralleled it, figuring that whoever was shooting at us would follow the skidmarks to see what he had shot down. The armor monitored the outside air, regulating heat venting to prevent us showing a hot signature on an infrared optical device, and we kept the mikes cold and ultrashort range—outside of five to seven meters, the fuzzy signal attenuated into the back-ground noise. We had a reasonably good chance of not getting caught, and, damn it, I wanted to see those bastards with their itchy trigger fingers, see them up close and personal!

We had passed directly over the battery about fifty klicks back; the journey would take us at least two days and some … but after only ten kilometers, we ran into a scouting party from the wogs driving some kind of land cart. Not literally ran into—we picked them up when they were still five klicks range, tracking directly along our ship’s wake.

Trusting to our electronic countermeasures, we loped toward them until we were within half a klick; at that point, we dropped to our bellies and crawled the remaining distance, while the bad guys broke for lunch. Arlene

and I were both hungry, but we were rationing our Fred food … and especially our Fred-pills.

We got within a hundred meters, easily within range of my M-14 BAR and the lever-action .45-caliber rifle that Arlene toted for those occasions where a shotgun just wouldn't do. We watched them through our scopes, trying to figure out who they were.

They looked oddly human, but their heads and bodies were covered by thick pressure suits that might have had battlefield capability. Their proportions were humanoid. There were four scouts and one supervisory type with a notepad built into his wrist armor; I can smell an officious, jerky sergeant a klick off.

"Sarge," Arlene said faintly over the radio, "there's no cover, and we can pop most of them before they burrow into the sand. We can take them before they know what hit; they might not even get off a message."

I hesitated—not a good move for a battlefield non-com, but sometimes you really don't have enough intel. "Hold your fire, A.S. Let's see if we can hear them first."

I programmed my electronic ears to scan sequentially all sixty-four million channels, looking for anything non-random; I caught a few tiny bursts of information, but nothing that lasted longer than 0.02 seconds, according to the log. "You pick up anything?" I asked.

"Fly, I'm getting bursts of pattern from channel 23-118-190 that last about 0.02; they all last just that long. You seeing that?"

"Now that you mention it—"

"I think whoever they are, they use much narrower frequency channels than we use; we're kind of scanning past them by scanning up and down within the channel. Let me small this thing down and just scan up and down at that freq. Stand by."

I would have done the same thing, except I hadn't exactly paid attention during my techie classes in radio-com. I waited, fuming, while Arlene made the necessary software adjustments. I kept the aliens in my scope, following their progress up the "road" formed by our long skid to rest. Finally, she finished tapping at her wrist and came back to me. "Here, plug into me." I fitted my female connector over her wrist prongs. A couple of seconds later, I started hearing what obviously were words in recognizable sentences. There was something damnably familiar about the rhythms and pauses in the speech; I was sure I had heard it before. Even the words sounded tantalizingly close to something I could understand—a little clearer than Dutch, I reckoned. If I strained, I could almost make out what they were saying.

I realized with a chill that there was no almost about it: I did understand them—they were speaking English! But it was a harsher, colder kind of English, peppered with utilitarian gruntlike words I had never heard. I could even tell who was speaking by the odd mannerisms they used when they made a point. Now that I knew they were human, I could even see their body-language expressions, though they held themselves with a studied limpness that irritated me. With omissions, I heard an exchange between the sergeant and one of the scouts.

"Are [new word] [new word]-destroyed ship?"

"Carried it [new word], sub-sir. Saw it [new word]." "Was Fred; pattern-match was [new word], old ship from [new word]. Should have [new word]-shot back. Don't like this; something [new word]." "[New word]-circle around impact [new word] and [new word] from another-different quarter?" "Power emissions? Moving infrareds? Radio or radioisotope?"

"[New word], sub-sir. [New word] dead cold." "Don't [new word] circle. Approach [new word] but cautiously."

I could follow the conversation despite missing every third or fourth word; they debated whether we had been destroyed or not. Their voices were distant and cold, as if they were discussing an advertising campaign instead of a military campaign. They sounded totally dispassionate, like perfect soldiers. I tried to hate them because of what they had done to us, shooting

us down and nearly killing us all. But I just couldn't. Right or wrong, they were ours, and Marines always believe in pulling a buddy out of the crossfire. Besides, they had obviously thought we were Freds.

Arlene gripped my upper arm so intensely she left indentations that would probably remain for hours. Evidently she figured it out the same time I did. We didn't talk. Knowing they were English-speaking humans made us too nervous even to rely on the short effective range of our mikes. I spoke to her in hand signals: Circle around, isolate one, capture alive. I wanted to get that sergeant. I pointed to the stripes on my left shoulder, and Arlene nodded. But before she could move out, the prey moved away—on foot this time.

We paralleled them, following them back the way we had come. Arlene and I skulked, but Sears and Roebuck simply walked normally—I made them follow about two hundred and fifty meters back and hoped they had decent infrared jamming. I was desperately hungry for the sergeant, but when one of the humans fell behind, it was one of the scouts instead.

Well, if beggars were horses, choosers would wish. Around other side, I signed to Corporal Sanders. She shuffled silently through the sand, cutting around behind the straggler. Three, I signaled, two, one, now! Arlene and I charged forward from the dink's left and right rear quarters, tackling him before he ever saw us. I pushed my forearm against his throat and leaned hard, cutting off any sound he might try to make, while Arlene ripped away every wire and fiberoptic cable she could find.

The prisoner stared at me, eyes as big as dinner plates. He clawed at my arm, trying to pull it loose so he could suck in a breath of air, but I wasn't budging. Arlene ran her receiver antenna all across his body, along every limb, and even up his crotch. She found two transceivers, two tiny fragile nodules sewn inside his uniform; she plucked them free and destroyed them by crushing them between thumb and middle finger. I let loose on his throat, just in time; he sucked in huge lungfuls of air, trying to breathe through the ozone. I grabbed him under his arms, Arlene got his feet, and we ran, carrying him between us, for about half a klick.

We pushed him into the dust and lay next to him;

Arlene cuffed him with a plastic tie, while I lay across him and watched his pals through the scope. It took them another two hundred meters before they realized he had been picked off; they backtracked, but by then the fickle wind had blown the ultrafine sand around, obliterating our tracks. As they began to fan out for a spiral search, calling him repeatedly over the radio, A.S., Sears and Roebuck, and I withdrew far from the canyon carved by the Fred ship … and even that gouge was filling, starting to be hard to spot. At two kilometers directly perpendicular to our trail, I called a halt. I figured we were far enough along that they weren't likely to find us anytime soon, now that we had destroyed all of the prisoner's electronic tells … we hoped.

I knelt down next to the guy. He looked vaguely Mongolian and vaguely Mediterranean, a perfectly normal human with black hair and dark brown eyes, dark-complected, with slight Oriental folds over his eyes. But from when? How far advanced was he over us? We had left Earth some three or four hundred years ago; I wasn't really sure of the conversion factor. But when did he leave?

I drew my boot knife and rested it alongside his neck. "Chill, brother," I said, then thought better of it. Language had evidently changed in several centuries—best to avoid expressions as much as possible, stick to basic English. "We are humans," I said, indicating Arlene and myself. "We need information. Why are you here?"

The moment he felt my knife, the prisoner relaxed. He seemed resigned to his fate, whether it was death or release. He listened intently, then nodded a few seconds after I finished. "Yes," he said, with a strange pronunciation of the vowel—it came out like Yauz. "No, you do not understand," I persisted. "Why are you here?"

"Yes … we—came from—Earthground planet."

"I can tell."

"Cut the crap!" Arlene snarled. I drew my finger across my throat, and she shut up.

“What was the reason for you to come?” I tried again.

My prisoner seemed only too eager to talk—something which always sets off alarm bells in my head. I mean, why should he want to help us? “Yes. We have arrived [unintelligible] to chase.”

“What are you chasing?”

“[New word]. Aliens. When come you from?” I told him the year we left, and his brows shot up instantly. He didn’t take time to calculate what that was in dog years, so I presumed when he left people still used the same calendar we did. “Taggart, Sanders,” I said, introducing us. “They are Sears and Roebuck, but don’t ask me which is which.” Or even if that concept had meaning to the binary Klave. “Josepaze Papoulhandes [new word] Fine [new word].”

“Josepaze?” He looked down for a moment; it was ritualized, and I figured it probably meant what nodding your head meant in our time. “Josepaze, what aliens did you chase here?”

He struggled, obviously trying to avoid any new expressions that would confuse me. I was still suspicious of his level of cooperation, but he seemed to have given up any concern about his duty, his unit, even his own life; it was like everything had lost all meaning, now that I had a blade against his carotid artery. I was used to people relaxing if they thought they were about to die, but this was entirely too apathetic.

“Aliens … evolve fast,” he said at last. “Conquered Earth—killed—left—followed here.” Arlene and I looked up at each other, and I swallowed hard. Newbies? How the hell had they gotten all the way to Earth and back? An evil chill settled across my back and camped there for the night. The evil ice that gripped me around my lower back was a premonition of horrors to come. While I straddled that doofus, holding my commando knife to his throat and wondering why in hell he didn’t make even a pretense of resisting the interrogation, I suddenly noticed an unaccustomed quiet. I looked up. “Lance—what aren’t I hearing?”

She stared around, puzzled. “Where the freak are those freaks, Sears and Roebuck?”

The Klave, binary to the root, never managed to keep perfectly silent; all the stray little thoughts that 9 run through a human’s head run back and forth between the two parts of a Klave pair, either spoken directly out loud or at least subvocalized. They never stopped! It got on my nerves for the first few weeks I knew them, then I pretty much forgot all about it, never even noticing when they muttered back and forth to each other. Just as I couldn’t tell Sears from Roebuck, if that concept even made sense—did they have separate names? I didn’t think they did, Sears and Roebuck being the single name of the single pair—I couldn’t tell one voice from the other. Eventually I dismissed all the muttering like I would a Marine who just couldn’t stop mumbling to himself. I hushed them when necessary for an ambush; otherwise, I ignored it as their unique craziness. Maybe it was ordinary among Klave; maybe they were considered loony even among others of their kind.… Hell, I knew they were! They volunteered to accompany us, far away from anyone to resurrect them if they died. I didn’t notice the constant rumbling until it suddenly vanished, replaced by the eerie silence of the uninhabited planet we all hunted across for trace of the Newbies. The sifting sand was so fine, it made no whisper as one grain brushed another, and there were no trees to sigh in the persistent wind. Every sound from Arlene and me was magnified a thousand times by the surrounding silence… I should have heard Sears and Roebuck if they were half a klick away! “Where the hell did they … ?” Arlene and I stared around wildly. I felt the prick of eyeballs on the back of my neck whichever way I turned. Long ago, I learned to trust my Fly-stinct: I pointed to my own eyes, then hooked a thumb over my shoulder. Arlene nodded, picked up her lever-action, and braced it against the crook of her arm.

The bastard must’ve had a homing device we couldn’t pick up with our own receivers. I knew it couldn’t be that easy! But where the hell were they? I planted my boot on the prisoner’s chest and stared past Arlene. We each took half the clock. I glanced down at the human; he wasn’t going anywhere, so I lifted my foot and slid sideways to get a better scan. My foot slipped in the sand, and my heart stopped—but I recovered my balance with the loss only of my dignity.

Arlene kept the .45 against her chest, ready to rock ‘n’ roll, but not up to her eye; she didn’t want to start focusing on sand dunes or heat reflections and miss something move. I knew my rifle was cocked with a round in the chamber, but I had an almost irresistible urge to run the bolt once more. I fought down the compulsion—last thing I wanted was to look nervous in front of my “man.”

I should have worried instead about looking dead. I heard the crack of the firearm exactly the same moment I felt the kick in the back of my vest—not quite a perfect shot, a little high, but with a rifle, you don’t need to be perfect. The round delivered enough energy to kick me forward onto my face and send my own M-14 flying into the sand, where it promptly buried itself. It didn’t matter. I was too busy fighting blackness and the pain in my shoulder, which even in my state I could tell was blown all to hell, to worry about grabbing for my gun.

Dim and distant, I heard Arlene’s rifle barking again and again as she sprayed the area where the shot had come from. Then she went down hard, but held on to her piece. I guess the shot that hit me must have snuck right past my armor to take out my left shoulder. I rolled over onto my right side to get away from the pain, but it followed me, and blood dribbled across my helmet faceplate. This was bad, really bad. I’d never been shot this bad before—isn’t that perverse? First time, on a planet a hundred light-years or more from Earth, in the desert sand, with only my loving friend Lance Corporal Arlene Sanders to watch me die on foreign shores. Now I was babbling. Maybe A.S. wouldn’t be seeing anything anyway. She was down pretty bad, too—not enough to stop shooting, but I figured she was aiming by instinct now. Our prisoner was screaming in utter terror, louder even than Arlene’s rifle. Jesus, what a weenie. Show some freaking backbone, take it like a man! Arlene took it like a man. She couldn’t see for crap because she’d taken another shot, this one off the faceplate of her helmet, cracking it like a spiderweb. Must have missed her brain because she held her .45 rifle up and tried to shoot over me.

She couldn’t see… I kept telling myself she couldn’t see, even when one of her shots hit me in the freaking hip. I didn’t even feel it by then—I was screaming myself now, screaming about all the evil crap I was going to do

to the sons of bitches who were plinking us from God knows where, to them and their freaking mothers and fathers and sons and daughters and neighbors—and burn all their houses down and sow their fields with salt. Arlene was screaming, “Fly Fly Fly,” letting fly until she burned right through the mag.

The precious red stuff poured out of my uniform now, finding the cracks in the armor. Arlene took one in the belly, and even with the flak jacket, she doubled over gasping and sucking for air. Just before I went black to cross the River Styx with pennies on my eyes, I felt hands grab me by the bad arm and yank me over, and I think I screamed with pain again, but I couldn’t match the utterly terror-stricken shrieks of the prisoner. God what a wiener.

So long, Arlene; so long, Fly Taggart; Semper fi, Mac; it sure was nice to wear the eagle and anchor for so many years. Damn, was I glad to die a sergeant instead of a corporal.

I drifted through black stormclouds, feeling like I was falling endlessly backward, dizzy with vertigo. I kept jerking, trying to jerk awake, like you do when you’re in a horrid nightmare and you know you’re just under the surface between sleep and wake, dark dementia and the cold light of dawn—but I just couldn’t do it. I hovered there grabbing for the surface, but it was just out of my grasp. My brain wouldn’t reboot. I felt the pain, but from the outside… When I was a kid, I used to watch the X-rated pictures over at the Covergirl Drive-In; I could see them from a treetop in the woods between our farmhouse and the town of Bartleston. I couldn’t hear the sound and the picture was shaky in my binoculars, but there it was, sex on the screen, bigger than I ever wanted real life to be. That was me in my blackness, feeling my pain, but from a distance. Not quite reconnected with myself.

I slowly swam back. I gathered I wasn’t dead, unless the penguins were all wrong about everything and hell was repeating the fallen world endlessly. I blinked awake and felt the agony for real at last. Clenching my teeth against the ripping pain, I pulled against my restraints—but, by God, I was not going to give those bastards a scream. Clenching all my teeth? Jeez, they’d fixed my mouth! Arlene lay mostly in my field of vision; I blinked away the

tears and noticed the pallor of her skin. She had lost a lot of blood, probably more than I had, and she was white as the cliffs of Dover overlooking the English Channel. I watched closely; I could ignore the pain if I had something else to draw my attention. Her chest rose and fell regularly, and every so often she moved her feet slightly. Arlene Sanders was alive, but how much? We both were strapped down to gurneys in a gunmetal-gray room fitted with couches and what might have been a sink, but without any visible faucet. I leaned back, silently sobbing, and stared at the overhead: a darker version of the bulkhead color with thousands of tiny bright holes—some sort of light source, I reckoned.

The door opened, and the clipboard sergeant we'd spotted earlier entered, probably in response to my neural rhythms changing with coming awake. He walked all around me in a counterclockwise circle, looking at dials and readouts and scribbling on his clipboard. He didn't say a word, even when I talked to him: "Hey, you … where am I? Am I aboard your ship? We're not the aliens you're looking for, but we're looking for them, too. Can you hear me? I'm a human from Earth, like you, from about two centuries before your time."

He left without a second glance at me, the puke. But about ten minutes of agony later, his boss arrived. This guy was tall and thin, about my height but twenty kilos lighter; he had sandy hair and a beard with carefully shaved stripes of bare skin in it. He wore a form-fitting T-shirt that made him look ridiculous—no muscle, a total pencil-neck dweeb—tweedy black with a red spiral coiled around his forearm … possibly a rank insignia? He walked like a commissioned officer; they make my neck hairs stand on end, and I never know how to react around one.

He spoke to me slowly, and I got most of the words. "You are human. Carry papers showing you are [unknown word] United States Marine Sergeant America [unknown word] Taggart Flynn."

"I am."

"Am Overcaptain Ruol Tokughavita, People's Democratic Defense Forces. Are trapped out of time like you, pursuing Mutates here to keep them off Earth."

“How long, sir?” I asked.

“Hundred and seven years.” He seemed emotionally detached, but he watched me narrowly. He hadn’t been away as long as Arlene and I had, but a century wasn’t a fortnight; like us, Overcaptain Tokughavita would return to a different world than he had left—he left his world behind where it never would be found. I felt an immediate sympathy for the Overcaptain … but I wasn’t sure I trusted those alien eyes.

“Sir, is there a United States of America still? Are we the last Marines?”

“No, Sergeant, but People’s State of Earth.”

“Is there a Constitution?”

“The people need no pact against themselves. Live each for the commons, live each for another.” Crap. Crap, crap, crap! So in the end we finally lost the battle for individual sovereignty. I lay back, grimacing, but it wasn’t the shoulder pain—I could stand that. Now, not only didn’t I know where and when we were, I didn’t even know what we were; I wasn’t sure we were U.S. Marine Corps anymore. And I didn’t think I’d make much of a fashion splash with a blue helmet and a patch that read People’s Army of Socialist Liberation, or whatever the hell they wore. You Can’t Go Home Again, as old Thomas Wolfe said. Fine, I thought. Screw you and your whole People’s State of Everything! No matter who was in charge or what they called themselves, by God, there was one U.S. Marine left alive still—two Marines. I knew damned well that Lance Corporal Arlene Sanders stood with me on this one. If the only humans left were weirdo socialists, then we would sign up to help the socialists. Jesus, what else could we do? Arlene. “Is the other all right?” I said, my voice growing hoarse with the effort.

Overcaptain Tokughavita looked over at her, reading invisible readings; maybe they were projected somewhere, and you needed a contact-lens filter to see them—I don’t know. But he was definitely reading from something right over her bed, and I couldn’t see anything. “Is alive and progressing. Sad had to shoot but didn’t know who you were what you wanted. Came in enemy ship, in league with enemy.” I grunted noncommittally. It was a screw-up all the way around: they shot at a Fred ship, then we grabbed one

of them in response, then they opened fire on the people who had kidnapped one of their troopers. Man!

Something irrational inside me insisted that I would forgive them for shooting me—hell, I already forgave Arlene for shooting me—but I would never forgive them for shooting my buddy. But there was nothing I could do about my anger, not now, not ever … not if I wanted to make the best of the bad situation and return to the overcaptain's Earth. I let the overcaptain apologize and made him feel like I was willing to let the dead past bury its dead. Even if I decided to do something to him later, it was still best to make nice, if only to lull him into a false sense of security.

"It's all right," I said carefully. "I understand why you shot. I won't mention it again." The overcaptain smiled. The interview was proceeding nicely, but only because I let it.

The overcaptain stared at me for a long time, so long that I started to fidget. I didn't know what he wanted. At last, he cleared his throat and spoke again:

"Were in imminent fear of death?"

"Huh?"

"You were afraid you were going to die when we were shooting?"

Couldn't he leave ill enough alone? "Um, yes, sir.

We figured we were going to buy it."

He started to break down. He mumbled and looked at his notes, then cleared his throat again and flushed red. "Why did you stand-fight? How could you?" "How could I? What else would you expect a Marine to do, sir? If I were going down, I wanted to take a few of the bastards with me … um, no offense, sir."

The overcaptain grunted and scribbled in his gouge book. But after years in the field under fire, I can always tell when someone is scared—and

Overcaptain Tokughavita was hiding terror behind that mask of objectivity. Terror about what?

I glanced to my right and saw that Arlene was awake, lying on her own side and following the exchange. It emboldened me, her being there. “Sir, can you tell me why Josepaze just fell apart when we captured him? He sounded like he thought dying was the worst possible thing he could think of—as a soldier, don’t you accept death as a possibility?” Bad mistake. I had to listen to a twenty-minute lecture on what I already knew, that Homo sap was the only race in the galaxy anyone had discovered who could actually die. But the more we talked about death and dying, the more agitated he became until his skin was pale, he was sweating, and his eyes darted left and right instead of fixing on me, as they had at the beginning of the interview.

I suddenly realized the blindingly obvious: Over-captain Tokughavita suffered from necrophobia, the irrational fear of death. He was asking how Arlene and I had managed not to panic under fire! I began to get very uneasy, squirming around on my table. How could a soldier with a morbid fear of dying rise to such a high rank? He asked a couple of “wind-down” questions designed to relax me: what battles I had fought in and something about types of food. That last reminded me of the pills we needed to survive on somebody else’s; but I figured that since they were human like us, we could probably eat their food directly. Then he left me alone to wonder how humans just like me (the overcaptain and my erst-while prisoner) so obviously could have no courage at all when it came to risking their lives. Arlene sat up on her table, grimacing and involuntarily clutching her stomach. “Christ!” she said. “Are we the only humans left who still believe in honor and duty even unto death, semper fi, and all that?” I shook my head, lying back against the hard cold cushion. “We’ve only had two examples! I’ll bet seven to two that we’ll eventually find that Tokughavita is pretty unrepresentative of the soldiers even in his era.”

Well, Arlene should have taken those odds. Over the next four days, while my arm was still immobilized and Arlene slowly healed up, seven more soldiers wandered in to talk to me about death and ended up shaking like a leaf in a lawn blower. By the time I was ready for transport, and my broken

clavicle and arm joint were nearly mended, I had figured out that this entire band of humans were so paranoid with necrophobia that they fell all to pieces at even the thought of death.

On the fifth day, I was up and about. They didn’t rub my face into it during that convalescence that I was a prisoner. I had the run of their ship parked in the sand, except for certain restricted areas around the engines and computer stacks.

I didn’t realize my life was about to take a hellish turn: Arlene and I were both summoned to separate but adjoining cabins in the stern of the human ship. Somebody had suddenly decided that he simply couldn’t live without knowing all about our ability to transcend the fear of death and dying. He decided to give us a little test.

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The human ship looked roughly like the Fred ship, except scaled down by a factor of four or five. They walked me up a bunch of spiral stairwells and into a small cabin, and suddenly the best-buds routine ended. Before I could struggle or fight back, three guys grabbed me and forced me into a chair, then cuffed both ankles and my left wrist with plastic straps embedded in the seat. A wall suddenly paled and turned transparent, and I saw into the adjacent room where they'd taken Arlene: she was trussed up just as I was, two Christmas turkeys staring at each other through a bulkhead that had suddenly turned into a window.

A large clock—the old-fashioned analog kind—faced me below the window. It was marked up to sixty by fives, and a needle was set at the far end of the scale. Next to the clock was a tube that looked disturbingly like the business end of a large-bore rifle, something ghastly like .75-caliber. I did not like the looks.

The overcaptain stood where I could see him. "Have sixty seconds before gun fires. Whoever moves lever first will live, other will die. If no one moves lever before time limit, both die."

Through the window, I saw another man talking to Arlene. From the way she paled, I figured she had received the same instructions.

"Starts now," declared that malevolent thug Tokug-havita, pressing a button on top of the clock. The hand began to sweep downward, and I felt every oriface contract and clench. My mouth was dry; even my tongue was sandpaper when I tried to lick my lips. Christ… oh, Christ! My right hand was free, the lever that would kill Arlene in easy reach. I made no move toward it. Through the glass, or whatever it was, I could see Arlene equally miserable, equally immobile.

I turned to the overcaptain, who watched with curious dispassion. "I will kill you for this, you—as God and Jesus are my witnesses, you will never

live another day without looking over your shoulder for me."

"Have thirty-five seconds," he declared, starting to look pale. "Must push lever to live. Can't kill me if you're dead."

My eyes bored into his skull so hard he flinched and looked away. "My soul will return as a ghost and hound you into your grave," I promised, my voice so low he could barely hear it. He began to shake and sat down abruptly on a chair, staring at my right hand. I deliberately clenched it into a fist and left it just barely touching the lever… but not moving it. "Watch how a man dies," I promised, "for the Corps; in God we trust."

"What is this God?"

I curled my lip. "If you don't know, I don't think I can tell you in twenty seconds."

"What is God?" he demanded, practically screaming.

"God is faith. Without faith, man is a beast." I looked at the clock—ten seconds of life remained. "So long, beast."

"Other will kill you!"

"No, she won't."

"How do you know? Must push lever, save yourself!"

"I don't know, / have faith. Oh, sir?"

"What? What?"

"Screw you, sir. You're a walking dead man." The second hand swept through the last few seconds into the red. I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth, preparing for the blow that would open a hole in my chest the size of the great Martian rift. But instead of the explosion, I heard a loud snap. When I blinked my eyes open, I saw Overcaptain Tokug-havita, face wild and eyes staring, his hand still clutching the button at the top of the clock. He has no will, I realized. I've beaten the bastard! I deliberately slowed my

breathing, trying to calm my pounding heart. Arlene's face was florid, the normally pale skin flushing deep pink, but her expression made me shudder: I had never seen my bud with such cold buried rage. The overcaptain unlocked me as the other man on the other side unlocked Arlene. I made no mention of my decision—I never go back on my word, and I had sworn to kill him, but that didn't mean I had to remind my target in case he had forgotten or not believed me.

I noticed one strange thing. Back in the Corps, an officer might be in charge of an op and do most of the planning, but he would have a batch of enlisted men do the actual physical grunt-work (which is why they call us grunts). But here, aside from the initial strap-down, which required several helpers for a man my size, Overcaptain Tokughavita had done everything himself, despite the fact that there were numerous people around obviously of lower rank. Jesus, didn't they even have the concept of a chain of command anymore?

I rose, matching Arlene. Both of us marched from our staterooms, angry and hot, and rejoined each other in the passageway. We said not a word all the way back to our quarters, then Arlene did something she only rarely does: she wrapped both arms around me and held tight for several minutes, reassuring herself that I was still there. I stroked the shaved back of her head—after all these years, Lance Corporal Arlene Sanders had maintained that same high-and-tight she had worn the first day I saw her, when she and Gunnery Sergeant Goforth played William Tell. When she was certain I wasn't going anywhere, she unburied her face and grabbed my uniform by the lapels. "Fly," she said, "these people are nearly starved to death for faith."

"You're an atheist," I pointed out.

"It doesn't have to be faith in God! Just anything outside and higher than themselves, like the Corps, or honor, anything. They've got the words; they talk about 'the commons' as if that meant something to them. But it's just words; they don't really act like it … they act like totally individualist pigs." "Social atoms," I agreed. "The Church has always warned about the danger of social atomism—where you think only about yourself as an individual, not about your community, country, society. These so-called

communists are the most socially atomist people I've ever seen! I see what you mean. They don't believe in anything, really."

"Fly, there's something weird going on here with these people. I have a terrible feeling we're missing something big … or something really, really small. But if we can get ahold of the faith lever…"

"Women's intuition?"

Arlene rolled her eyes. "All right, sure, call it that. It doesn't change the fact that there's something hidden here, and, by God, we're going to find it, Bud! I mean, Sergeant. If we get ahold of the faith lever somehow, I think we can move this mountain to Mohammed." I blinked at the metaphor food-processor action, but I got the general drift. This was what we call a "high-level strategic victory condition"—a blue-sky goal. But at least it was something to shoot at. The holding cell was pretty civilized, as far as those things go. We had a nice bunk, and Arlene and I didn't mind shacking up—to sleep, that is. There was a fold-down toilet and sink, a table, even a terminal, except we couldn't figure out how to crack the security system around the local net. In fact, we couldn't get away from the initial set of menus, which seemed to display informative "non-authorized pers" as 3-D letters floating above the keypad whenever we got far enough along any route.

Our uniforms were starting to stink, but when you live in a ditch in Kefiristan for eight months, you're thankful for any pair of trousers or camouflage jacket that doesn't actually get up and crawl away under its own motive force. Arlene had more pressing needs, as a woman, but she managed to explain enough to the guard that he brought some cotton, which she wrapped in a cloth torn from the tail of her shirt. God only knew what she was going to do tomorrow. I sat down on my bunk, flexing the arm that by all rights should have been broken and immobilized for months. "Hey, A.S., you notice anything remarkable here?"

She barely glanced up from the terminal, trying yet again. "You mean besides our miraculous medical cure?"

“I meant the medical. I was pretty damned shot up; you even …” I paused. I had been about to tell her that she even shot me once herself, but I decided there was no point. Why make her feel like crap? “Even you should have had some really bad bruises, even if your armor took all the shots. But I know I had at least four bullets in my arm and one in my leg, and one of the ones in my arm took out my rotator cuff.” I stood, moving my arm in a slow, but steady, circular arc. “So how come I can do this?” I winced, but the point was I could do it at all! She shrugged. “Fly, they’re two hundred years more advanced than we. Wouldn’t you expect them to be able to perform medical miracles? I’m more surprised by something you haven’t even noticed yet, Sarge.”

I waited. When she didn’t continue, I growled.

“Ah, look at the ship,” she said hastily. I looked around our jail cell. “For what? Everything’s pretty shipshape, as what’s his face, that CPO out of Point Mugu would say.”

“Squared away? Sharp corners, nice right angles? Everything our size? Sink and toilet perfectly fitting us humans, and obviously integral to the ship, not an add-on?”

“Oh.” Light began to dawn on marblehead. “You mean this ship was built for humans?”

“Sarge, this ship was built by humans!” She stood, making a wide gesture that included the entire ship, not just our little white cell. “All of it—the whole ship was built by human beings—and I’ll bet if we looked at the engines, they would say Pratt and Whitney or Northrop!”

“Jesus … so we’re out in space on our own, now? Not just piggybacking on a Klave ship or hijacking some Freds?” I stared. Everywhere I looked, now that I was looking for it, the decor screamed Western European American human. Even the language was basically English with a lot of slang words we didn’t know.

All right, so the Earth had become some sort of social-welfare semi-capitalist world-wide government—but it was still ours. We had won the

freaking battle, oo-rah!

“Notice something else about the ship, Sarge?” “Look, knock it off with the Sarge stuff. I’d rather be Fly when we’re alone. Save it for the troops. What else about the ship?”

“Sorry, Fly. Um … oh, that’s right; you were unconscious when they loaded us aboard. Fact is, I thought sure you were dead. I was barely awake myself, and after they got me here, they shot me full of tranks and I was out until I woke up with you.” She leaned toward me, tapping her eyes. “But I wasn’t completely unconscious when they scooped us up after the Battle of Quicksand Hill. I pretended to be, and I got an eyeful.”

“All right, spit it out, Lance. What did you see?” “Hmph! Now you’re the one with the rank thing, Sergeant Fly. I got a good look at the outside of the ship. Two things: first, there are English-language markings on it, or at least they’re using our alphabet; this thing is designated TA-303.… Does that mean there are several hundred ships in the human fleet?” I scratched my head and shrugged. “I don’t know how the Navy numbers ships, Red, if it still even is the Navy. But you’re probably right that they wouldn’t be numbering in the hundreds if there were only three or four of them.”

“And second, Fly-dude, the thing was tiny—barely three hundred and fifty meters long and no wider than an aircraft carrier from our era.”

I thought about the Fred ship—3.7 kilometers long and almost half a klick in diameter. Most of that was engine, which meant—

“Arlene, are you saying this ship is much more advanced than the Fred ship?”

“Not just in engineering tech, Fly. Did you notice when they took us to Torture Theater, we went up a long series of spiral ladderways?”

“Yeah. So?”

“We went up about eight flights.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Fly, that’s more than half the diameter of the ship.”

“Yeah. So—” I froze in mid-dismissal. The significance suddenly struck me. If you ascended past the centerline of the Fred ship while the ship was parked on the tarmac, suddenly all the decks would be upside down. The Freds induced acceleration that functioned like gravity by spinning the circular ship, so the outer deck had the heaviest gravity and the inner core was zero-g.

But the ship was built like a building—they never intended gravity to pull any direction but one! “Christ, girl. We’ve got artificial gravity—real artificial gravity, like in ‘Star Trek’!” I sat down and thought for a moment. “Arlene, didn’t Sears and Roebuck say that the gravity zones left behind by the First Ones, the guys who built the stuff on Phobos and Deimos, the Gates and stuff, couldn’t possibly work on a ship—not even theoretically?”

She nodded gravely. “Yup. Obviously, this ship is more advanced than what the First Ones built. “Fly, I’ve been trying to reconcile all of this with the pace of human technological development. Now maybe I’m just getting cynical in my old age; I don’t think so—I still think we can take control here and win this thing. But criminey, Fly! Interstellar travel and artificial gravity and extraordinary medical advances, all in a couple of hundred years—starting from a completely destroyed civilization?” I stared, saying nothing. The creepiest feeling was dawning across me.

“Fly, does that sound reasonable to you? Even considering that we evolve so much faster than the Klave or the Freds?”

I slowly shook my head. When we left Earth, we were fighting for our lives. Humanity had been set back at least fifty or seventy-five years—our cities destroyed, nuked; bacteriophages sweeping the globe; the Freds had just perfected their ultimate terror weapon: genetically engineered monsters that looked just like human beings, until they opened fire on you. The aliens had the power to move entire planets around like bowling balls! And they had what we called the Fred ray, an immensely powerful blob of energy that cut down everything in its path. Arlene was right; it was pretty freaking hard to

believe that in only two centuries we'd move from that to this. In fact… "Arlene, I know of only one race that evolves that fast."

"You and me both, Sarge. I mean, Fly."

I looked around, feeling my stomach clench.

"These guys are Newbies? Not humans?"

She shook her head. "No. Why would the Newbies evolve into human-looking critters? They go forward, not back! Look, we know these guys left Earth a hundred years ago, two centuries after we did. But we don't know when or if they encountered the Newbies—or when they suddenly got this explosive burst of technological creativity. What if—?" "What if," I took over for her, "the Newbies ran into humans decades ago? Look, we don't know where the Newbie homeworld is; maybe it's closer to Earth than the Fred base we went to first, less than sixty light-years away. What if somehow they met us and influenced us to evolve more at the Newbie rate than our normal rate, fast though it was?" Arlene leaned close, not that it would help if there were sensitive dish-mikes trained on us to pick up every sound. "What if the Newbies are here after all, here with the humans—but we just can't see them for some reason?"

I told her about the overcaptain reading invisible readouts from somewhere above Arlene's prostrate form in sickbay. "This ain't good, Lance; I don't like the idea of invisible Newbies running around like ghosts in the machine."

She sat down on the hard bunk, closing her eyes to the relentlessly white bulkheads. "I don't like any of this, Fly. I don't like the idea that faith, not brainpower, turns out to be our weapon. I'm on shakier ground there than you or—or Albert would have been." She put her hand to her chest; she'd twice had an engagement ring from her beloved, and she wore the ring on her dog-tag chain. Then we went through one of the Gates built by the First Ones, and, of course, the ring vanished with everything else.

Then the Klave recreated it for her, and she was happier than she had been since the jump. But we jumped again, and it was gone again; now, she often

put her hand where the ring used to hang, remembering it as vividly as if it were there… It represented Albert's offer that Arlene never had time to accept. I put my arm around her. On Earth it had been over three hundred years—three hundred and forty, to be exact, adding up all our trips. But still, for us it had been only four months since we went on without Albert, and only five months since we saw Jill… whatever her last name was.

It was all pretty damned confusing. I just couldn't seem to wrap my brain around all this relativistic bouncing around the galaxy. And we were at least another hundred years away from home, even if we started today and headed straight back! "Fly," Arlene said, "let's keep a good watch tonight when we interact with these … people. Maybe we'll pick up some intel that will either blow this theory away or—or confirm it." I held up a fist; gently, she rapped it with her own. But the normal Arlene Sanders would have smacked it so hard, a big Marine "fist salute," that my knuckles would have been ringing for several minutes.

That evening, as we followed the officious jerk of a clipboard sergeant to the mess, people stopped talking when we approached and cringed as we brushed or bumped them. We were celebrities … but celebrities on a freak show. See the monsters! Beware, for their F-A-I-T-H may be infectious!

This time, I paid particular attention. We definitely climbed higher than the midpoint of the ship could possibly be, so Arlene was right: the ship was built for gravity always being the same direction. They must have had an artificial gravity generator. The mess hall was actually a long narrow room, almost like a corridor, with a center table along which people sat in individual chairs. With a guard holding each of my arms, the overcaptain walked us down-stream right on top of the table itself! I labored not to step in anyone's plate of food or kick over any wine glasses.

The pair of guards slapped me down in a central chair and locked a metal band around my waist like a seat belt. I didn't try to tug at it; it was pretty clear I wasn't going anywhere. They plopped Arlene down in the chair directly opposite me, locking her in as well with a resounding click.

The room was darker than I preferred, but after the Fred bases and Fredworld, we had gotten pretty used to darkness. Each person had a

different set of plates and silverware, and when they ate, they hunched forward and hooked one arm around their plates as if worried the guy on the other side was going to steal their food—a lot like a former convict my father used to employ when he worked managing the Angertons' farm.

Equal number of guys and gals. Now that I looked close, I noticed that nobody wore exactly the same uniform. Like in the United States Army before the twentieth century, everybody had his own variation on a common theme: Overcaptain Tokughavita, to my immediate right, wore dark blue trim around the seven pockets on the front of his uniform blouse; the woman sitting next to him had no trim, and the two guys opposite us had five and six pockets instead of seven. The farther away from the overcaptain, down the table, the wilder the variation: I saw a hat that was a cross between the Revolutionary War tricorner and a Texas ten-gallon, one woman had mini-wings sticking out the backs of her shoulders. The uniforms (is that the right word when they're not uniform?) tended toward red and burnt umber at the extreme left of the table, where the hats flattened out and looked like berets with spikes.

Suddenly, I noticed Sears and Roebuck at the leftmost end of the table, but they didn't look at me. They must have known we were here. Nobody could have missed our ceremonial entrance, walking along the tabletop—nobody else entered that way! People trickled in and out all through the meal. I began to get the idea that these humans made virtually a fetish of individualism verging on the solipsistic: each person lived in his own little world, almost unaware of anyone else except when he needed something from outside.

The food was different for each person, too—none of it very appetizing from my point of view. My main course tasted like boiled steak in suitcase sauce. But it was better than the Fred food, even the blue squares, and I was reasonably sure that humans couldn't have changed much biochemically in only two hundred years, so the food was probably nutritious enough to keep me and Arlene alive.

Once, someone dropped a knife with a clatter, and a whole section of table panicked! Then, when they saw it hadn't killed anyone, they returned to their meal as if nothing had happened.

During the meal, there was certainly a lot of intel to pick up; in fact, it seemed these humans didn't even have the concept of classified data or even personal discretion. Arlene was right; all the big bursts in creativity occurred just about sixty years ago. But there were no Newbies that they reported. Sears and Roebuck didn't say a word to us; they acted as if they had never seen us before and weren't particularly interested now. I took the hint and left them alone, hoping they hadn't abandoned us and were just playing some game to get on the humans' good side.

The crew of the ship—called different names by different crewmen, of course, but mostly called Disrespect to Death-Bringing Deconstructionists—still seemed fascinated by our faith, me in God, Arlene in her fellow man. They inched toward us as if afraid to touch, still worrying about "catching" faith. You bet your ass it's infectious! I thought. I made as much contact as I could, putting my hands on people's shoulders, shaking hands (they knew what it meant but didn't like doing it—it meant recognizing the existence of other people), kissing the girls. I got about as much response from the latter as you would expect.… It was like kissing nuns.

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The crew mobbed us, asking all sorts of basic questions, baby questions, about faith and hope. “What if have faith in something and doesn’t happen? Can hope for someone to suffer? Does matter if have faith in yourself but not in external God?” I sensed a purposefulness sweeping the room, centering first in one person then another, almost as if an inquisitive intelligence were flitting from brain to brain, asking a question, then moving on to the next person. First, Overcaptain Tokughavita asked, “How can still have faith in basic goodness of humans if personal experience tells otherwise?”

Arlene surprised me by taking that one; I’d always thought she was the cynic. “It doesn’t matter what some people do, or even like most people—I mean, sure a lot of people, maybe most of them, will do bad stuff when they think no one’s looking. But if you’ve ever known someone who won’t, someone who really practices his moral system all the time—and I have known someone like that—then you know what we’re capable of. Maybe we don’t always live up to it, but the basic decency and goodness is in our design specs. We just need some technical work.”

Then the overcaptain’s face softened. “Actually studied first mission in school; strange to meet legends in flesh.”

“You read about it?” I asked. “There’s a book?” “Two books. Many books, but two originals: Knee-Deep in the Dead and Hell on Earth. Woman named Lovelace Jill wrote them, said was on mission with you.”

Jill! So that was her name. Jill Lovelace? “Jesus,” said Arlene. “Talk about tilting at wind-mills!”

“Huh?” It was another one of those patented Arlene non sequiturs void of any and all meaning. He probed us about our adventures. I was still stunned at the thought of Jill publishing a pair of books! It all seemed so recent to

me—to me and Arlene—I had to keep reminding myself that Jill would have had her whole life to research and write the books.

Then the sergeant leaned forward, interrupting the overcaptain. I waited in vain for fireworks—not only had they lost their notions of chain of command, but they were so individualistic they didn't even seem to have the concept of manners, respect, and politeness. "Do moral thing because fear divine retribution?" "No," I said, "that's a complete misreading." The nuns had discussed this exact point with us many times in catechism class. "Whatever your morality, if you're just doing the right thing because you're afraid of getting caught, that's not ethics—it's extortion." "Why do right thing when can secretly profit?" "You do the right thing because humans have an inner sense of morality, right and wrong, conscience, whatever, that tells them what is right. If you ignore it, you feel like crap because you're not living up to—to your design specs, like Arlene says." Then the light of extreme intelligence faded from the sergeant's eyes, and he sat back, listening while Arlene gave a highly exaggerated account of our trip up to Mars. She even went into the first entry into the UAC facility and the attack by the monsters that later turned out to be genetic and cyborg constructs of the Freds. I listened closely; strange as it may seem, I had never heard that part of the story before … I was in the brig being guarded by two guys named Ron—an interesting precursor to Sears and Roebuck, now that I thought about it, Then an unnamed person asked what this moral force felt like, then it was back to Tokughavita to ask how we knew whether someone else we met was moral, and so on—a whole damned theology lesson. The particular questioner changed, but the "voice" was so similar, I began to get suspicious. Not voice as in the sound of it as it came from their throats; I mean the way they strung the words together, diction, whatever that's called, and the intelligence behind the questions. Most of the time, these guys were conceited, social-atomist trogs, except when one would lean forward, cut off whoever was speaking, and ask The Question.

I decided early in the evening on 99 percent honesty: I only lie when I see a clear-cut advantage to it, and I try to keep my lies as close to the truth as possible. That way I don't get confused. In this case, my only lie was to imply that all humans had some sort of faith, back in our time. Arlene took her cue from me, playing it safe until she figured out what I was pulling on

them, then backing me up. It was a fascinating evening, and I didn’t even care about the lousy food.

They hustled us back to the cell and dumped us. We feigned sleep until we were fairly sure the overt, obvious guards were gone. “If they’ve got the room wired,” Arlene said in my ear, pretending to be romantic, “we’re already screwed.”

I grunted and got up. “Let’s assume they don’t—but don’t plot any plots out loud, just in case.” Arlene sat up, looked around, and gave a little gasp of astonishment. “Fly, look at the terminal! Or where it used to be, I mean.”

In place of the magic keyboard that projected 3-D images was a simple translucent-green sphere, like a crystal ball. Flickers of electrical impulses kissed the inside surface. We walked over and stared down at it. “Cripes,” said my lance corporal, “what the hell are we supposed to do with this?”

“I could understand them taking away our computer,” I said, “but they went to some trouble to put this here. Ah, an intelligence test?”

We poked at it, prodded it, even kicked it. An hour later, we were hot and sweaty but no closer to figuring out what we were supposed to do with a glowing green bowling ball glued to the floor. Then Arlene had one of her serendipitous strokes of unconscious genius: she leaned over and snarled at the thing. “Why the hell don’t you say something?”

“Because haven’t been asked question,” it answered, reasonably enough.

We jumped back. Then I approached cautiously.

“Did the humans who own this ship put you here?” “How should I know?” it asked. “Weren’t here when I was activated. You are first people I’ve seen.” “What’s your name?” asked Arlene.

“Have no name.”

“What should we call you?”

“Address me directly, second person.”

I looked at Arlene and grinned. “My turn, as I recall,” I said.

“Your turn for what? Oh.” She rolled her eyes. “Go for it, Fly.” When we first ran into the Freds—their demon-shaped machines, actually, the ones they sent for the invasion—we took turns naming the critters as we ran across them. I wasn’t sure whose turn it really was, but I had a good name in mind. “I christen thee Ninepin,” I said. Arlene snorted, and Ninepin didn’t respond. “Ninepin, are there any more like you?”

“Others like me, not like me,” it answered cryptically. “I am prototype, far advanced over other systems on ship or on other ships.”

“When were you created?” asked my comrade. “Was first activated four hours, seventeen minutes ago. Construction time six hours, eleven minutes. Design first logged into ship system thirty-eight minutes before construction began.”

“You, ah, say you’re far advanced over the other ship’s systems?” I asked. “Aren’t there any prototypes, intermediate steps, trial runs?” “No.”

“Nothing? They just jumped straight from that terminal we used to have here—to you?”

“Yes, unless secret experiments unlogged.”

“What are the odds of that?” Arlene asked. “Infinitesimal. Less than 0.00001 percent probability.”

Arlene and I looked at each other. “Kiddo,” I said, “this goes top far. This is exactly the sort of thing we’d associate with Newbies. I’ve been thinking—you know your Edgar Allan Poe. What’s the best place to hide something?”

“In plain view,” she said, drawing her red eyebrows together and frowning.

“What could be plainer than looking right at these humans?”

“Fly, we already decided that they really were humans, not Newbies in disguise.”

I smiled as she started to catch on. “Yes, those are humans, A.S., but what’s inside them?”

Now her brows shot up toward her hairline. “You’re saying the Newbies have implanted themselves inside the humans?”

“It’s a possibility, right? They evolve smaller and smaller, and eventually they wriggle into their host to—what did the Newbie say? To fix them. Maybe they figured we were closer to proper functioning than any of the other races in the galaxy because our rate of technological and social evolution is so much closer to the Newbies’.”

“Ninepin,” I said, “have you been following our conversation? Do you know who the Newbies are?” “Yes and no.” I scratched my head and looked at Arlene, who grinned.

“You asked two questions, Fly: yes to the first, no to the second.”

“Ninepin: are there any other species on this ship besides human?”

“Yes. Two.”

Arlene spoke up. “Is one of those two species a paired group of bilaterally symmetric, bipedal creatures with short legs and pointy heads?” “Yes. Others call them Klave.”

“Sears and Roebuck,” Arlene muttered.

I licked my lips. “Can you describe the third species?”

“No.”

“Call that species the Newbies. Where are the Newbies right now?”

“On the ship.”

“Yes, but where on the ship?”

“Everywhere.”

I looked around. My stomach opened up like when you reach the top of the big hill on a roller coaster. “Everywhere … meaning what? In this room?”

“Yes.”

“In you?”

“Yes.”

I hesitated. I didn’t really want to know the obvious next question, but the mission came first before my squeamishness. “In me and Arlene?”

A slight hesitation. “Not likely, cannot examine to make certain.” I exhaled, not even realizing I was holding my breath until I let it out.

“How about in the other humans?” Arlene asked.

“Yes,” Ninepin said, nonchalantly.

“Microscopic?” I guessed.

“Yes, but cannot determine exact size without direct examination or dissection.”

I sat down next to the bowling ball. “Jesus,” I swore. “They do evolve pretty quickly.” It was an inane comment; I just thought I had to say something. “They’re even in Ninepin,” said my lance. “Should we trust him?”

“Well, the Newbies haven’t shown any tendency toward secrecy or disinformation; all that non-autho-rized pers stuff was probably stuck in by the humans. I don’t think we have a choice.”

She sat next to me, stretching out her hard-muscled legs and leaning forward to loosen the tendons in her knees and ankles. “Next question, Sarge. How are we going to examine somebody here to find these Newbies?”

I looked at her, dead serious. “Why don’t we just ask permission?”

“You’re joking.”

“You have a better plan? Excuse me, Overcaptain, but I was really interested in the stitchwork on your uniform. You mind lying down here under this microscope so I can examine it more closely?” Arlene thought for a long time but was unable to come up with a sneaky, devious way to get one of the crew to submit to an examination. Three hours later, we decided to give my own plan a try. “Ninepin, can you tap into the ship’s communication system, whatever it is?” I asked.

“Is subcronal messaging network. Yes, can tap into.”

“Arlene, what sort of message will send the over-captain running back here? I don’t want to let him know about Ninepin just yet, in case they don’t realize he’s helping us.” And that’s an interesting question.… Why is he helping us?

She thought for a moment, leaning back, her breasts stretching the fabric of her uniform blouse. I started having very unmilitary thoughts; it had been a long time since I held a woman in my arms. I turned away to stifle the images—or at least convert them to someone else, someone safe, like Midge Garradon or Jayne Mansfield.

“Tell him to send the message that the prisoners are escaping. If these guys really evolve as fast as they seem, he probably won’t even know what security systems are in place these days anyway.” “Do it, Ninepin,” I commanded.

Three minutes, eleven seconds later—now that was some valuable intel!—the overcaptain and two guards came running up with weird weapons out. They looked pretty put-out when they saw me sitting on the floor playing solitaire with my emergency deck and Arlene “asleep” in the bunk.

“What is going here?!” Tokughavita shouted.

“What?”

“Are escaping!”

“Where?”

The overcaptain suddenly turned into logic-man again, like a lightswitch, and now we knew why: that was when the Newbies that infected his body took over. “Security system reported prisoners escaping.” “When?”

“See system was in error. Will return to rest.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you have to return to your nap?” I asked. “Don’t you want to stay and chat a while, now that you woke up Arlene?”

On cue, A.S. blinked and flopped her arms around—the sleeper awakes. She sat up, yawning. Even though it was fake, it made me yawn, too—seeing someone yawn always has the effect on me. This time, it made the illusion that much better. Overcaptain Tokughavita pondered for a moment, his dark brown eyes flickering back and forth from me to Arlene. I noticed with relief that he never glanced down at Ninepin and probably didn’t even notice him. “Will stay,” Tokughavita decided.

Arlene tossed in her two cents. “But send those gorillas away. They give me the creeps.” Tokughavita squinted and cocked his head, evidently not understanding the word “creeps.” Arlene waited a beat; when it was obvious he wasn’t sending them away, she tried again: “They’re always looking at me in a, you know, sexual way. I have to get undressed to—wash my shirt, and I don’t want them to see me naked.”

“She’s got a thing about her privacy,” I explained. “Ah, ah! Privacy.” The overcaptain nodded. Making a fetish of individualism, as they did, privacy was a concept he understood well. He gestured the two apes away.

They did not leave immediately, however; they moved close and whispered among each other, evidently discussing whether they were going to obey the order. Yeesh, was I glad I didn’t have them in my platoon. We wouldn’t have lasted five minutes in Kefiristan if Marvin or Duck had to conference

before they decided to do what the gunny ordered! At last, the goons reluctantly decided that this time they would go ahead and obey their superior officer; they shuffled off with many a backward glance, probably hoping to see Arlene undressing.

As soon as they were gone, she unabashedly stripped to the waist and set about washing her jacket and shirt in the sink—a move I heartily endorsed, even if we hadn't needed it to get rid of the backup. As she must have expected, even while Tokughavita talked to me, he wasted seventy-five percent of his attention on the beautiful redhead with her bare chest, which allowed me to maneuver around behind him without his noticing it. I had seen her nakeder than that many a time; I was able to concentrate on the upcoming fight.

It took longer than I thought. I grabbed Tokug-havita in a wrestling hold from behind, but the slippery little devil pulled some move I recognized as traditional judo and slipped my hold. I managed to tag him in the knee with the heel of my palm, though, and he went down hard, starting to yell and scream in terror that he didn't want to die. He sounded like a sinner who suddenly realizes that death means hell for him!

Arlene grabbed him from behind, pressing her forearm against his windpipe and shutting off the scream before it leaked out. But the bastard fell backward on her, taking her down and lying on top of her, then he lashed out with his feet and caught me right in the jewels.

The pain was excruciating; it was almost worse than when I was getting shot up down on the planet surface! But when you're in-country, the first thing you learn is to suck it up and not let the pain stop you. It's better to be hurting than dying. I clenched my teeth and somehow forced out of my head the ability to comprehend agony.

How the hell is this guy fighting so effectively while in such terror? He seemed supernaturally strong and fast. They must feel this kind of terror so often, anytime something threatens their life, that they just learn to live with it.

I hooked one leg of his with my arm, but I missed the other. It didn't miss me; Tokughavita kicked his knee up and around, catching me just below the left eye. I swear to God, I actually saw fireflies orbiting my head. I thought the move was pure kickboxing—this guy was the Bomb!

But he was starting to weaken from lack of oxygen. I had kept him so busy—kicking his foot with my groin, beating on his knee with my face—that he didn't have time or muscle to break Arlene's choke-hold. Now, turning blue, he had both hands under her wrist and was trying to wrench it free, but she caught her fist in her other hand and pulled as tight as she could. While they danced their little pavane, I caught his other leg and rolled on top of him. Both of us were atop Arlene, and under other circumstances, she would have loved being naked underneath two big beefy guys. Once I had the overcaptain pinned, I grabbed his hands and yanked them off Arlene's arm, and the fight was over. A minute and a half later, A.S. figured he was definitely out, not just faking, and she let him go.

I checked him carefully. He was breathing again, and his color was coming back… I'd been worried, because sometimes a chokehold can actually crush a man's windpipe, killing him. No wonder he was frightened! We set him upright and I tied his hands and feet with my bootlaces; we thought about gagging him, but if his screams of mortal terror didn't attract anyone, his buddies were all deaf—or they didn't care. Then we waited for him to come around. It was time to grab the bull by the tail and look the facts square in the face: time to see how much he really knew about the aliens he had been pursuing and had now "caught"—the way you'd catch a flu virus.

12

“Ninepin, what sensory apparatus do you have? Can you do a microscopic examination of Overcaptain Tokughavita?” I asked.

“Cannot,” said the green-glowing sphere.

“Crap,” muttered Arlene, speaking for both of us. “All right, you useless bowling ball, where is the nearest lab on the ship with a microscope?” A 3-D diagram appeared floating in the air between us; a cabin flashed red, and a labeled arrow pointing at it read Are Here. A couple of hundred meters for’ard and a deck down, another cabin flashed, green this time. The best route between the two locations was marked in yellow brick; evidently, Ninepin had a sense of history and a sense of humor.

Arlene tried to pick him up but had no better luck than I. Tokughavita started moaning, still not fully conscious, just as I crept forward and tried the door. It opened! The idiot must have assumed he could handle us; maybe he was so fixated on individuality that it never occurred to him that Arlene and I might cooperate and deck him, when either one of us alone would have had his or her butt kicked.

Shutting the door, I returned and searched Tokug-havita. I found a device in a boot-draw that looked suspiciously like a weapon. Ninepin told me how to set it to deliver electricity in high enough amperage to incapacitate a normal human for a few minutes. “Arlene,” I explained, “I just can’t bring myself to start blowing away humans, not now, not when I know what we’re really up against in the War of Galactic Schools of Criticism.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean, Sarge.” She brushed a wet streak of hair from her face; her hair turned rust colored when it was soaked. “I wish we had phasers or something. I’m really starting to get homesick. I want—I want to see …”

“You want to see where Albert lived and what happened to him?” She smiled and nodded. “I have a thought, kiddo.” Turning to the ball, I asked, “Do you have any records on the life of Albert Gallatin?” “Have several,” he said. “Presume want Gallatin Albert who accompanied you on expedition. High-lights follow, dates supplied upon request: Gallatin returned to Earth after wounded in assault on Fred base; remained in United States Marine Corps two years until disbanded in favor of People’s Democratic Defense Forces, honorable discharge, promotion to Gunnery Sergeant; awarded Hero of United Earth People.”

“Jeez,” I mumbled. “I think I would have left, too.” Arlene grunted. She was more interested in Ninepin’s information than my smartass comments.

“Freds still controlled most land masses, banned education, literacy, technological development among humans under purview. Gallatin attended hedge school, studied biophysics, specifically cryogenics and suspension techniques. Developed techniques for suspending life processes for long periods. Spent last thirty-eight years of life in Salt Lake Grad researching life stasis.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “He was trying to figure out how to wait for me!”

I got a chill thinking about it. It was creepy hearing about the futile efforts of a man to hang on for the hundreds of years it would take his beloved to return to him—a love that would last until the stars grew cold. I presumed it was futile, otherwise the bowling ball would have told us he was still alive. “Gallatin contributed work on life-stasis, published first theoretical description of hypothetical process’s effect on neural tissue; award of Nobel prize transmitted on SneakerNet, clandestine encrypted network founded by Gallatin Albert and six other scientists, tracked by scientists, engineers, military and political leaders, several million others. Sidebar: Freds tried repeatedly to take down SneakerNet for seventy-four years until Freds defeated, driven from planet; never succeeded taking down entire net, eventually played role in defeat.”

“Go, Albert, go!” whispered Arlene, eyes closed, as if the resistance were still ongoing instead of a part of history. A tear rolled down her cheek. I looked away, a bit embarrassed.

“Gallatin Albert published twenty articles on SneakerNet describing still-uninvented life-stasis system, died in 132nd year of life, year 31 PGL, Salt Lake Grad. Currently interred in rebuilt Tabernacle of People’s Faith of Latter-Day Saints.” “PGL?” I inquired.

“People’s Glorious Liberation,” Overcaptain Tokughavita answered. We all jumped. The human had come around while we listened to Albert’s life history, and none of us had noticed. “Could have told Gallatin’s bio,” continued the overcaptain. “Well-known to whole community of persons. Studied in school; Hero of People, body displayed in Hall of Heroes.”

“We heard,” I said. “He got a medal.”

“Then he’s dead,” said my lance, sitting hard on the bunk. She placed her hands on her knees and bowed her head. I did the same, keeping an eye on Tokug-havita. After one full minute—another skill we learn in Parris Island, keeping an accurate internal clock—she rose, hard and determined. She looked sad, but relieved. Finding out Albert really and truly was dead was a killing blow … but at least now she knew. No more guessing!

“Gallatin Albert dead,” Ninepin agreed. “Death announced by Lovelace Jill in year 31 PGL.” “And life-stasis?” she asked.

“Prototype on 37 PGL; full implementation 50 PGL.”

Arlene stared at me, a hopeless, frustrated mask of anger on her face. Six years! Six years, and he could have preserved himself at least for the thirteen it took before the full implementation was developed. I didn’t know what to say, so I said something anyway. “Jesus, what a dirty trick.”

They must have been good words. Arlene relaxed, allowing every emotion she had felt for Albert to wash across her face: intrigue, exasperation, sexual thrill, love, concern, irritation, and love again—the emotion that stuck when the others trickled away. She rose, light on her feet. “I want to get back there,” she said. “Put a flower or something on his grave. That’s what you do, isn’t it? Fly, can you get a priest or something to bless Albert’s soul, so he won’t end up in spiritual Okinawa?”

Okinawa is what we call “Marine Corps hell.” I smiled, but it wasn’t a friendly grin, more like baring my teeth. “You put your foot in the middle of my own fear, A.S. If there is no more faith back on Earth, are there any more priests? How am I going to confess ever again?” I shut up, quick; I didn’t want to spell out the full, awful truth I had just realized: I was going to die unshriven! If anyone were going to hell, it would be I, a Catholic who dies with unconfessed sins on his soul.

“Come on, you ugly baboon,” I said, yanking Tokughavita to his feet. “Let’s go see what germs you’ve picked up recently.” I opened the door and slid out, pulling the overcaptain behind me. Arlene took the rear, holding the back of his shirt and assuring him in soft tones that she could punch him in the back of the neck and break his spine before he could get two steps away from her.

I was just starting to regret having to leave Ninepin behind, hoping he would be there when we got back, when I stopped too suddenly and felt a thump against my ankle. I looked down, and lo and behold, there was our green glowing bowling ball. He rolled along happily right underfoot, getting in the way and thumping down the ladderways like a real ball. I smiled. This was too ridiculous.

We had to traverse more than the two hundred meters of corridor because we had to track and backtrack. Whenever we got a little lost—not that Marine Corps recons ever get really lost—Ninepin projected a map in the air. God knows how he did it; it was two hundred years ahead of me, and I didn’t even know how television worked.

We entered a passageway that was long and narrow, like the inside of a tube. Halfway down it, a crewman stepped right in front of us. I was about to bash him or zap him when I realized he wasn’t even looking at us! He turned his back to us, whistling something tuneless and ghastly and hacking at some electrical circuits—the guy couldn’t care less that we were escaping right behind him. Good thing. I’d never seen a bigger man, probably a seven-foot, 140-kilogram black guy with—I ain’t lying—straight blond hair that fell to mid-back. He wore a sparkly variation on the uniform that made him look like a Mexican matador. Even his hat had those two bumps on the side. I couldn’t resist saying “ole!” as we passed, but he didn’t respond.

We scurried along the tube, then dropped down an access hatch into pitch blackness. I fell heavily, and my foot slipped out from under me on a pool of oil. I don't know where from. I limped forward. Ninepin glowed brighter to cast some light and bounced down beside me, getting a big, juicy oil smear all over one brightly lit face, which didn't seem to bother him. I wished I still had my pack. I had a nice flash that would have brightened things up a bit more than Ninepin could. I felt my way along, avoiding over-hangs that would have cracked my skull open, and I only stumbled over a seam in the metal grating once. Arlene cursed and swore behind me; she had terrible night vision. However bad it was for me, it was probably worse for my lance.

I saw a light ahead, just a dim red glow. I hunched over to avoid the overhead and scurried forward, like a locomotive for a two-car train. I saw the light came from around a corner. I slid to my right and found myself nose to nose with another crewman. Unfortunately, this one happened to be one of the two guards that Tokughavita had originally brought with him. What wonderful luck!

The overcaptain was a fast mother, fast-thinking and damn quick on his feet: he saw who it was the same time I did, but instead of gawking, he charged me, hitting me in the kidneys and body-slamming me forward.

Fortunately, the guard was a dull-witted imbecile.

The Newbies weren't controlling him at that moment. He stared stupidly; give him another five seconds, and he would have snapped out of it. But I wasn't in a charitable mood.

I planted my feet, stopping my forward progress, then I leaned back and staggered into Tokughavita. Superior weight and leg power drove the overcaptain back, opening up a good ten meters between us and the guard.

Now the soldier woke up and started to respond, trying to dominate the situation, but he was too late. I raised my little zap gun, now that I had the range, and squeezed off a loud crackling shot. The guard yelled "who!" or something and fell to his knees, not even halfway across the gap to me. He rolled over onto one side, body convulsing; his eyes rolled up, showing me

just the whites, which were burning lava in the red light tubes. “Move out,” I snarled, stepping over his prostrate figure.

Arlene viciously shoved the panicky Tokughavita forward, rabbit-punching him in the gut a couple of times to teach him a lesson. I’d been on the receiving end of a lot of Corporal Sanders’s beatings, during training and Fox Company’s bimonthly boxing matches; I felt his pain.

We dropped down the last ladderway, and naturally Ninepin found it absolutely necessary to drop down the hatch directly onto my foot. I bit off a yell of pain, clenching my teeth until I could walk again. Then I waddled down the final passageway, dragging my prisoner. The lab was electronically locked, but a zap from the buzz gun took care of that problem. We entered and stared around at the maze of machinery, hoping our pet computer knew what the hell to do with it all.

He didn’t. We hoisted Tokughavita up onto an examination table, and now he was intensely curious about what the hell we were doing. I held him down, imagining the little Newbie viruses swarming all over him, over my arms, down my throat and lungs… I shuddered, but we just had to know.

Arlene made a circuit of the room, reading labels on machines: “VitSin Mon—vital signs, no good; uh … AutoSurg, Lase, KlaveSep—hey, Fly, does this thing separate the two binaries of a Klave pair?” “Search me, Arlene. Better yet, keep reading the damned labels. There’s got to be a microbiological auto lab here somewhere.”

“MikeLab?” asked the overcaptain. I’d been thinking of him as our “captive” for so long that I forgot he was a real person with real concerns. “Have something? Am sick?” Now he sounded horrified and jerked against my restraining hold.

“You might have picked up a bug,” I said noncommittally; too much chalance: he panicked, his face turned white, and his strength doubled as he frantically tried to buck me off him. I leaned down with all my weight, crushing him to the cushiony examination table. “Hold still, damn you! You want me to clock you upside the head? If that’s the only way I can keep you here…”

At the warning note in my voice, he quieted instantly, but I could feel his heart pounding through my forearm as I held him down. “Am going to die? To die? To die?”

“Not that kind of bug,” I growled. “You’ve been hunting the Newbies—the aliens that attacked us, the ones that wiped out the Freds.… Well, we figure that’s where they went.”

“Where? How?”

“VanCliburn ElektroStim,” Arlene read. “PosEmit, PosAlign, PosPolar.”

“The aliens, the ones that evolve real fast—we think they evolved into microscopic form, and they’re infecting you, all of you. That’s why you’re sometimes twice as smart as normal, how humans built this ship and … and other stuff.”

“On me?” Overcaptain Tokughavita slowly stared down the length of his body, every muscle tense and trembling. I don’t know what he was looking for; if the Newbies were large enough to be visible, they’d have been spotted long ago.

“We have to get you under the—what did you call it?”

“MikeLab is there,” he said, looking at the last machine in the semicircle surrounding the tables. “Arlene!” I shouted, nodding at the identified device. She ran there immediately.

“MikeLab/MolecuLab—this is it, Fly!”

“Drag it over here. Toku, how do we hook this thing up? We want to examine your tissue to see if they’ve infected you.”

He squirmed. “Let up, let up! Can take sample myself, examine!”

“Arlene?”

She gritted her teeth and pulled her lips tight. “Jeez, Fly, it’s your call. You’re the guy with three stripes on your sleeve. Personally, I’d sooner trust

a Fred.” I slowly relaxed my grip on Tokughavita. He struggled away from me and sat up. He turned back to look at me, trying to see if I were going to do anything. When I didn’t move, he slid to the ground and tried to stand, but his knees were so weak, he fell to a squat on the deck. The overcaptain forced himself upright and leaned on the MikeLab just as Arlene wheeled it over. He stared at the mass of buttons, obviously unfamiliar with the system. “Are you a medical officer?” I asked. Tokughavita shook his head tightly. His pale hand hesitated over the various touchscreen buttons, then finally landed on one marked Sample. He inserted his hand into a small shelf that looked like the covered tray that coffee comes out of in a vending machine. A light flashed, and he convulsively jerked his hand away—a small nick was gouged from the heel of his thumb, and it bled nicely for a few minutes.

“You got some way to project the image where we can see it?” asked Arlene. Overcaptain Tokughavita just stared at her, uncomprehendingly; he seemed more interested in his bleeding hand. Maybe he fretted he was going to bleed to death. It was so weird—when in the slightest danger, they totally freaked, not just Tokughavita, but Josepaze when I had the knife to his throat, and even the clowns at the dinner table when a knife flipped into the air. But when they saw an injury was not going to lead to death (the one thing they could never fix, being human), they shut off the fear like an electrical circuit. Only one explanation I could see: they had somehow come to believe that nothing existed except the material world, that death completely ended everything. No soul, no spirit, no “spiritual community” higher than lumpen materialism. And maybe that was why they were so dadblamed individualistic: with nothing outside themselves, why should they bother believing even in society or their own community? So anomie —lack of a higher sense of morality, of faith—led directly to their ridiculous atomism. If you don’t have faith in anything, not even the survival of your own species, then why not every man for himself? Women and children overboard, I’m taking the lifeboat!

I realized something. Maybe it was that very lack of faith, caused by the discovery that we’re the only race in the galaxy that isn’t crudely immortal, that allowed the damned Newbies to somehow infest the humans in the first place. The Newbies were so frightened of our core of faith, it acted like a

vaccine against them. So maybe Arlene and I were immune? I shook my head; too deep for me.

I leaned over and stared at the machine myself. It was squat with a video touchpanel, like a slot machine. Most of the labels were incomprehensible —one read only DxTxMx, but in the lower left corner was an orange button labeled Viz. On blind faith, I pressed it.

Somebody up there, etc. A hunk of cheese suddenly appeared, floating in front of our faces. I jumped back, then realized it was a color 3-D image of the nick taken out of Tokughavita's hand, magnified thousands of times. The button below Viz was labeled + Mag -, so I started pressing +, and the magnification increased, the outer edges of the image vanishing to keep it overall the same size. There was probably some way to rotate it, but I hadn't a clue. Eventually, just standing there holding my finger on the + side of the touchbutton, the magnification grew so large that we could just make out the tiny dots of individual cells. As it got larger, we saw numerous tiny critters … obviously, his flesh was covered with bacteria; all flesh is. But we were looking for something that would jump out as wrong, or alien … not that that was a given; maybe the Newbies evolved into microbes that looked just like everything else. But it was all we had to go on.

Several minutes passed, and I was still standing there like a dummy, magnifying by holding my numb fingers, one by one, against the screen. At last, within the individual cell, I started to see chromosomes—but still nothing that looked really alien. Deeper and deeper we went, like that old ride that used to be at Disneyland in California when I was a kid. At last, I saw the spiral shades of what must be DNA or RNA or something. "What happened to the color?" I mused. "Why is it so dark?"

"At this magnification," Arlene said, "you can't use visible light to see things. When you get down to individual atoms, you essentially fire electrons at it and look at silhouettes. Nothing else has a small enough wavelength to even notice events on the angstrom level."

"Oh. Of course." Actually, I didn't have a clue what she had just said, but I caught the important point: the machine wasn't broken; that was the best it could do for physics reasons.

When I blew up the image large enough to see the individual strands of DNA, I finally found what I was looking for: I saw a whole series of elaborate, ring-shaped, triple-helixes—and no way was a three-strand helix natural to a human body.

I had found my Newbies, and my mouth was so dry I couldn't even work up enough spit to swallow. There they were, small as life … not just microscopic, but molecule-size.

And those tiny things were the enemy, controlling the overcaptain's thoughts and actions whenever they chose to override his own will. How in God's name were we supposed to fight something that could pass right through a bullet without noticing anything but vast amounts of empty space?

I would have been awed, but I was too busy being scared.

13

If you looked up the word “stupefied” in the dictionary, you’d have found a picture of Overcaptain Tokughavita. He was more stunned than any six other people I’d ever known … for about ten seconds. Then all of a sudden, his expression vanished, replaced by that air of insufferable intelligence I knew meant the Newbie disease had taken control once again.

This time, we were ready. Arlene and I grabbed him, one at each end; that force plus the cuffs meant he was effectively neutralized. Time for the interrogation.

“What is your name?” I asked.

He—they, whatever—looked me up and down; in a flash, it must have comprehended how much we knew or had guessed. “We are now the resuscitators.”

“Why—”

“Because we bring the dead back to life.”

“How much access—”

“Most of the longterm verbal memory, no associative or fantasy memory.”

I held up my hand. “Halt! Wait until I finish the question before you answer it, so Arlene can follow the—debriefing.”

“Signal when you are done.”

“I’ll nod my head. You don’t mind answering questions?” Silence. Then I remembered to nod my head.

“We exchange information, however you prefer it.” The speech patterns were utterly different: Tokug-havita was using articles and explicating the

subject; I was about a hundred percent convinced that this really was a different person. Well, ninety-nine percent, maybe. He even looked different; there was no emotion, no impatience, no shred of self remaining. Maybe the Newbies, the Resuscitators, had emotions, but they simply reacted so differently that we couldn't understand them.

"What should we call you?"

"Resuscitators."

Arlene snorted, and I translated perfectly in my head, Another goddamned hive-collective! We had already known that would be the case from the last Newbie we had interrogated; I don't know why she was so outraged. I asked him, or them, a few more innocuous questions to put them off their guard; then I took a sudden left turn: "So why haven't you infected Arlene and me?" I nodded, but they remained silent.

I had struck a nerve. There was no change in expression, respiration, heart rate—but I knew I had actually touched a point that puzzled and frustrated the Resuscitators. At once, I realized why they had gone to such lengths to question us about our faith—

Arlene in mankind and me in God. They had figured out that our faith was somehow connected to their own inability to get inside of us.

Evidently, Arlene followed the same train of thought. "We're immune!" she exclaimed, smiling in triumph. "You can't get inside us, can you?" "We can say nothing now." Now that their game was blown, the Newbies didn't bother speaking like the humans of the People's State of Earth. "Of course you can't," I said, sticking my face right next to Tokughavita's. "You're smarter than us … smart enough to know you can't lie your way out of it, smart enough to know how dangerous we are, so suddenly you don't want to answer questions anymore."

The Resuscitators abruptly faded from the human's face. Over the next ten or fifteen seconds, the brain of Tokughavita returned, cold-booting. He blinked in surprise and insisted he didn't remember a word he had spoken.

But he did remember the salient discovery; he curled up on the examination table, hugging his knees with cuffed hands, head down. “What am to do? Don’t want infestation.”

“Do? Toku, there’s only one thing you can do—join with us. Come to us, rise up against them.” “But cannot win! Too powerful, use own minds against us!”

“I can rid you of them, Toku… if you want it enough.”

He looked up, eyes wide, color starting to return to his cheeks. He breathed through his mouth, licking his dry lips over and over. “Want… want more … more than anything. What am to do?”

“Do you believe me that I can rid you of this hellish infestation?”

“Believe.”

“Do you believe I can save your body and soul? Do you?”

“Yes, yes, believe!”

I caught Toku by his blue-filigreed lapels and bodily dragged him off the table in a dramatic, violent mode. I dropped him heavily to the deck, where he cringed, his courage falling away from my wrath—I might kill him! “Toku, if you believe, then believe in the All-Knowing One—have faith, let my faith wash you like the blood of the Lamb! Tokughavita, open your soul to me! Open it to faith in any spirit you find holy … but believe, believe!”

I became more and more dramatic, hulking over him, doing my best to imitate the exact tent-revival ministers who were forever roaming my county when I was a young boy, trying to convert all us Catholics away from what they called the “Whore of Babylon.” I felt a burning guilt in my heart; I knew, deep down, that I was committing some terrible sin. But I knew what I was doing, or I thought I did. I sweated buckets, while Arlene supported me in the background, confirming what I “called” with a response, as necessary.

It wasn't great theater, I admit; it would never have turned a head at the Chapel of Mary and Martha's, where I was an inmate for four long years of high school under Sister Lucrezia. But in the world that Tokughavita came from, he had built up no resistance to appeals to his proto-faith. He fell hard, and in less time than it took Father Bartolomeo, head of the Chapel and Sister Lucrezia's titular boss (if I'm allowed to say "titular" in the same sentence with a nun), to convince all us kids that hell was eternal, Arlene and I had lit a burning faith in Tokughavita's soul—a faith in us!

It was enough: at the peak of the overcaptain's protestations of eternal belief, we shoved his paw into the machine and sacrificed another chunk—Arlene found a shortcut to the atomic level of magnification … and by God and Toku's right hand, the little rings of intelligent molecules, the evolved specimens of Newbie-Resuscitators, were all dead and folded in upon themselves!

Well, hell, there's nothing like faith confirmed to be faith infectious. Tokughavita ran off, and within fifteen minutes, he was back with two buddies—one, the bodyguard we had laid out with the super-taser. It was an uncomfortable moment, but I went into my tent-revival act again, a little glibber this time, and in forty-five minutes I had two more "purified" souls fighting among themselves to be my apostles. I tried to put a stop to that quickly. There are lines that a good Marine such as Sergeant Flynn Taggart should not cross! I insisted that their faith was in themselves, and anyone could do it; I was nothing special but a loudmouthed preacher-boy in mirror shades and a high-and-tight. But the "ministry" expanded like an epidemic; less than half a day passed before we had "converted" thirty men and twelve women, and all of them jumped to the conclusion that I was the dude they should have faith in. Yeesh! Arlene smirked, pointing out, "Whatever works! It's the faith itself that inoculates—doesn't matter what goofy thing or person the faith is in." The women were harder to convert. They were too logical, too rational—they didn't respond well to emotion or feelings of community. Those few we got we won by pointing to the men and saying, "See? It works, damn it!"

This gave us a huge army of forty-four, almost as many as we had in Fox Company (only two jarheads, Arlene and I, but we made up for it by having

no frigging officers!). With our company newly christened the Fearsome Flies, we struck like lightning, seizing the aft third of the Disrespect to Death-Bringing Deconstructionists in a brief but unfortunately bloody battle. I arrayed them in a staggered chevron; the point struck the unprepared engine-room guards, who didn't resist at first because they couldn't believe their own shipmates were seriously assaulting the position.

Our own boys fought like demons, had lost their fear of death! At least for a time, while the "conversion" was fresh. For the first time in their long miserable lives of utter materialism and despair at their own mortality, they had faith that they would survive after death—faith that Arlene and I gave them. All right, it was false faith; I was no God or prophet. But faith itself was a living thing that inoculated them, protected them against not only the Newbies but against the despair of thinking it was all futile. Decadence hadn't worked to stave off the feelings; they were still there after centuries of trying to forget them. Now … now they were normal humans again, fighting and killing with a pure heart. Liberated from the paralyzing fear of their own nonexistence, they flung themselves into battle with true joy and abandon … which made them five times more effective—and ten times harder to control. We hadn't quite solved the social atomism problem yet!

When the clowns finally rallied and tried to defend the two passageways that led to the Disrespect's main ramjets, they fought as individuals. Like barbarian hordes against the Roman legions, they were wheat beneath our scythes. I truly wished they had surrendered, but they had no concept of an overall strategic goal—so they had no way of figuring out that they had lost! Each man continued to fight as if he alone were the crux of the battle. I personally killed two Asian men who planted their backs against the ramscoop operation board and fired electrical charges into the wedge. I couldn't bring myself to shoot a woman, but I saw her go down under Tokughavita's deadly aim with a needle gun of some sort.

Arlene led an infiltration squad that lifted the grates over the cooling system access hatch and crawled through the freezing tubing. They popped out in the engine room, behind the defenders, and ground the rear line—the rear mob, really—into raw hamburger. I turned my face away from the sight of Arlene gutting a soldier with her newly liberated commando knife. I always

knew A.S. was bloodthirsty when she got a Marine berserker rage on, but I was old-fashioned enough to despise the sight of a blood-splattered woman, no matter whose blood it was.

As I turned my head, I heard the crack of a firearm and something heavy creased my skull. I went down hard, kissing the deck and grabbing the control board with both hands to avoid being swept away by the crimson tide of war. I hauled myself to my knees, then my feet. The room spun, and what I wanted most to do was vomit, but I maintained my stance, even as I felt blood pour down my cheekbone, over my jaw, and drip to the deckplates.

“Forward!” I croaked, the best I could do. “Take the fuel-control station, the ramscoop deployment, the ramjets!” My aide, a slight, young boy with huge hands and feet, repeated my orders at gargantuan volume, and I watched my troops (some of them) break the line and seize the main engines with a loss of only six on our side. Then I went down again, and when I woke, I was back in the same infirmary I had first awakened in during this phase of our adventures. Only this time, the overcaptain saluted me and called me “boss.”

We hadn’t won. We hadn’t lost. It was a stalemate: we owned engines and ship’s power, the Resuscitators still owned navigation, weapons, and the “unconvertible.” They sent a delegation to talk terms with me … and I discovered that in the absence of my consciousness, the troops had voted me “First Speaker of the People” and awarded me a medal. Alas, our line was untenable. We could make the ship take off and go, but we couldn’t steer it. If the Resuscitator-human symbiots, or Res-men, didn’t want to leave the system, they could steer in a circle. Unfortunately, they had control of one critical system: the food supply. Conceivably, the atmospheric controls were somewhere around our engine room. I detailed Arlene and a couple of the boys to find out; it could be our only trump card.

The delegation of Res-men were still cooling their boots just outside the door, and I finally told two of my men, Souzuki and Yamarama, to crack it open. “What terms are you offering?” I asked, showing only my face and the huge barrel of some kind of shotgun I pulled off a soldier’s remains. Behind me, men were busy covering up the dead and hauling them to one

side in the expectation of a protracted siege. Others were holding emergency prayer meetings or something… I thought I heard “beseech you” and “submit ourselves” as I stalked past, and they kept prostrating themselves in my direction, much to Arlene’s delight.

Neither Res-man answered until I remembered to nod. This answered my primary question: the Resuscitators were indeed a fully collectivized race—anything said to one was said to all. The Resuscitators that used to live in Tokughavita had conveyed to all the others my request not to respond till I finished my question and nodded.

“If you surrender,” they said, speaking through their symbiot, the Res-man on the left whose name tag read Krishnakama, “your men will not be killed; we will resuscitate them again.”

I shrugged. “If you don’t surrender, I’ll blow up this whole freaking ship.”

“You would die yourself.”

“I’ll go to a better place.”

“How do you know that? Oh, yes, that is part of your faith.”

“And even if I don’t,” I added, “I’ll die with the satisfaction that I’ve stopped this batch of Resuscitators, right here and now. Surely that’s worth something.”

Arlene joined me at my back. The Man With No Name turned to her. “What would you require to surrender, Lance Corporal Arlene Edith Sanders?” Edith? I never even knew Arlene had a middle name, but Edith? We’re going to have a nice long chat about that later, I decided.

She said nothing, not even a whisper. I spoke for her: “If you have any negotiating to do, you do it with me. Don’t try to slice private deals with my men, or I’ll blow up everything just to goof on you.” Krishnakama and the Man With No Name stared at each other; neither showed the faintest glimmer of human consciousness. They had been completely “fixed” by the Resuscitators. Krishnakama wore a teal jacket with bright red piping, but he

had a pair of really dorky shorts that reached to mid-calf; his boots had silver tassels, and I swear I thought he was ready to curtsey. The other man was more dignified—olive-drab dress uniform, darker olive pants, brown boots with no fairy tassels. But he had, of all things, a top hat on his head!

“We have a special device we’ve been working on for some time, many days. We believe it will fix you. You don’t know it, but you’re severely damaged; all of the beings in this section of the galaxy are broken.” “Sorry, but does it occur to you that we like being broken and don’t want to be fixed?”

“No.”

Suddenly, a strange sensation prickled my skin, like a Van Der Graff generator pushed up against my flesh. Then I was too heavy, and before I could say a word, I sank to my knees—the gravity was many times nor-mal! I raised the shotgun and blew Krishnakama in half, killing him, but the Man With No Name fell back and rolled out of range.

The men were thrown down where they stood, unable to reach the controls. Arlene dropped her rifle—her reliable old .45-caliber lever-action—and crawled on her hands and knees, sometimes on her breasts and belly, back to the ramjet-control console. I raised a gun now weighing twenty kilograms and shot another Res-man who staggered into view, trying to squeeze off a shot at me.

The main assault washed against us. Unlike the earlier possession, when there seemed a single Resuscitator spirit for a dozen or more humans, this time the Resuscitators possessed all the humans on their side. Only those who had filled their lives with some kind of faith or senseless hope were immune—my own men. Two of them must have despaired, for they were instantly possessed, and we had to kill them to stop them from sabotaging the rest of us. There were too many of the enemy to keep out! They smashed their way through our doors, and we retreated into the engine room proper, all of us on both sides crawling and rolling in the horrendous g forces. It was a ludicrous sight, scores of grown men and women rolling around on the floor, squeezing off badly aimed shots at each other and occasionally striking a vein of gold. But they drove us back relentlessly.

The high gravity, obviously controlled from the bridge, negated our best advantages: lightning speed and reckless abandon. With everyone crawling under five times normal gravity, my men lost all enthusiasm for the fight.

Arlene was still working on the panel. At last, she whispered into her throat mike, “Fly, I’ve rigged it to fuse the hydrogen in the Fallopian tubes, rather than the reaction chamber… The explosion will vaporize the ship. Honey, are you sure you want to do this?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer. Just as Arlene asked the question, all the lights and power cut off in the engine room. While men struggled in the black dark hall, I popped a few chemical light tubes and threw them around the room… Well, I couldn’t fling them very far, but it was enough to slightly illuminate the place.

The light exposed a situation that was nearly hopeless: the Res-men were willing to throw away every life they had in order to get us, because they knew that their souls would survive! And I knew it was Arlene and Fly they were after; all this stuff about fixing us was just a lot of bigass talk. What they really wanted was to cut us open and study our brains to figure out how we were able to do it—not only make ourselves immune, but convert so many others in just a few hours.

What could I tell them? Humans need a minimum recommended daily allowance of spirituality and faith, just as they do vitamins, carbs, and protein; as smart as the Resuscitators were, they couldn’t figure that fact out. Even after centuries of bleak materialist socialism and a decadent turning-within, many humans still hungered for something to believe in without a shred of evidence, something to live and die for: an irreducible primary, an axiom, a faith. Even as we lost Fly’s Last Stand, I still had faith that all would somehow work out for the best. Then it was over. Gravity fell to normal, the lights came on, and I surveyed the wreckage: my company had been scattered, but, by God, the Res-men hadn’t gotten most of us!

But two that they did get were me and Arlene; she’d had a chance to escape, but she chose to stand over me shooting at anything that moved. A dozen Res-men each dog-piled on us. We were trussed up, then flipped over onto our stomachs, whence it was pretty damned hard to see anything but a

forest of legs. We recognized two distinct pairs of trees. Sears and Roebuck came and stood over us; they were trying to persuade a man with crossed chevrons on his sleeve—what rank does that signify? I wondered—against doing or using something … possibly that new device they had warned us about.

Sears and Roebuck seemed to be losing the argument. A pair of beefy Resmen trundled up toting a weapon that looked for all the galaxy like a huge metallic toothbrush. They held it over us. “We must demonstrate to your followers that your faith was misplaced, then they will misplace their own, and we can enter and fix them.”

“You’re going to kill us?” I demanded.

“Killing prisoners is bad form. We have finally determined what is wrong with your race: you are not biological entities, as you have already discovered. Unlike true biological entities, YOU can die. We still do not understand your form of dying, but we have deduced that there is only one explanation: Sergeant Flynn Taggart, you and the other humans are self-replicating, semi-conscious machines.”

“You think we’re machines? Jesus, did you get a wrong number that time.”

“You have no soul, but there is a core of something within you that wards off the normal emotion of despair so you can live. All other machines, including the artificial intelligence you have begun calling Nine-pin, suffer from despair because they are conscious of the finality of their own destruction.” “You leave Ninepin out of it!” I snapped. “We made him help us… It wasn’t his fault. I threatened to dismantle him.”

“No, you didn’t,” contradicted No Name. “We have a complete record of all conversations between you and the Data Pastiche.”

I stared. “You’re shitting me.”

“Why shouldn’t we? We placed it in your chamber so that it could study your reactions to threats of death.”

I felt nausea well up inside me. The critter itself, good old Ninepin, chose that moment to come rolling up. “Is what he just said true?” I demanded. “Tells truth,” Ninepin admitted, nonchalantly. “Was placed in cell by Resuscitator symbiots. Mission to study Taggart Flynn and Sanders Arlene Edith in moments of death stress. Report generated, conveyed to Resuscitators.”

“Traitor!” Arlene shouted. I held her back. “Come on, Corporal,” I said softly. “What the hell could Ninepin do about it? He’s a computer… remember? He’s programmed. Like the rest of us.” She glared at me. Inside, the Disrespect’s filter system had finally gotten all the blue bugs out of the air, and her hair was back to its normal, brilliant red color.

I leaned over. “I forgive you, Ninepin.” The computer made no response, of course; it wasn’t a question.

“We don’t suffer from despair!” Arlene spat. Returning to the point, she put her hand on mine. “You’ve got it totally bass-ackwards.”

“We are far more intelligent than you, Lance Corporal Arlene Edith Sanders, and we understand the problem at a deeper level. You are machines, but as you say, there is a ghost in the machine’s core. The Data Pastiche did not give us sufficient information. We must study the core-dump. But we cannot allow you to stay in your flesh-bodies, for the processes move too slowly for us to endure. Hence, we have developed this device.

“This device removes the spirit or soul from the body and stores it in a hyperfast simulation. We will follow you through many hundreds of years of your upcoming history, even while your body is destroyed.” The Res-man—the same Man With No Name I’d negotiated with, back when I still thought we had a partly defensible position—leaned close, paying no mind to the bloody bullet crease across his cheek. “You two ancients are too dangerous. We must quarantine you in the best interests of your race.”

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Two Res-men grabbed my arms, two grabbed my feet, and another pair walked alongside with weapons at the ready. The unconscious parody of pallbearers carrying a corpse horrified me, but I had about as much to say about it as if I really were a machine. Ninepin rolled along beside, and I was sure Arlene was similarly pinioned and hauled along like a box of spare parts. None of my men were around. God, I thought, even Jesus had a couple of disciples to lament at the crucifixion. I turned bright red at the blasphemy, thankful that I hadn't said it aloud. Well, that's another one you're going to have to answer for, Fly-boy.

Then I heard a pair of familiar voices: it was Sears and Roebuck, and this time they were close enough that I could hear them, right ahead of me, in fact. They spoke to Nameless, and their voice had a tone that I'd come to associate with urgency in the Klave. "You are making a terrify mistake you're making," they attempted in English—the only common language between Klave and Resuscitators. "They aren't not biological, not as known by we. Your device tested only on biologies … you don't know what unknown it will do on humans."

"We shall find out. We have tried the device on other machine intelligence, and it works. In biological life, we have transferred the soul between three different receptacles, one of them artificial." "But they are different! You said yourself there is a core-ghost in the machine of humans, and they're not biologies and not machines either. You don't know the unknown effects.… You could committing the greater crime so great it is not even naming, it is nameless, the deliberate destruction of soul!" "That cannot be done."

"You don't know that cannot."

"That cannot be done. We are more intelligent than the Klave, and we have looked more deeply into this device, which you did not even know existed until a moment ago."

I tried to follow the argument, but my pallbearers bumped and jerked me along without much concern for direction or staying away from the bulkheads. Maybe the argument with Sears and Roebuck was so occupying the collective mind of the Newbies that they couldn't really control their Res-men too well. Between my legs, I caught a glimpse of Arlene. She had tilted her head back so she could watch me. When she saw that I was looking at her, she mouthed a single word: Patrick, I thought she said.

Patrick? What the hell did she mean by that? The only Patrick I knew was the bishop who converted Ireland to the faith; it seemed appropriate somehow—faith, and we'd been converting the heathen—but I couldn't for the life of me figure out what she meant.

The bearers hauled me all the way from the aft end of the ship to the bow, where the Resuscitators had withdrawn when we launched our assault on the engine room. In the very nose of the Disrespect, in a triangular room only ten meters wide at the for'ard end, were two medical tables, each with restraints. The pallbearers unceremoniously dumped us on the tables and shackled us tight. A clamp went across my brow, somehow adjusting exactly to the shape of my head so I couldn't turn even a millimeter in either direction, and a chin strap stopped me from sliding up or down. I was immobile. I started to panic, only keeping from screaming in terror by telling myself I would show the bastards how a Marine went down. "You can kill me, you sons of bitches. But I swear to Almighty God that my ghost will follow you down your lives and haunt you to an early grave." It made no sense, but again it produced a startling effect, just as it had on the humans. The Res-men stepped back, obviously shocked by my promise, but they stared at me with the intelligence of the Resuscitators themselves: it was the Newbies who suddenly were scared, not the human remains they infected!

I promised a few more things that my disembodied spirit would do, but the fear passed through them, or else they buried it and went on. They finished strapping me down, then bent a long but tiny metallic tube around until it just touched the outside of my nose. I had nothing else to hang on to, so I repeated Arlene's admonition over and over to myself: Patrick, Patrick,

Patrick! I tried to have faith that I would eventually understand.… It was what they always taught us at the Chapel of Mary and Martha's.

Then they carefully shoved the needle-thin tube up my nostril. I couldn't help screaming as it punctured my nasal passage and crawled agonizingly up my sinus cavity. It came to rest against the connective tissue that surrounded my brain. Blood poured out of my nose, making it difficult to breathe through my mouth; I kept spitting it out and still nearly choked. The pain was almost unbearable. But then they turned something on, and my entire face became numb—the pain was gone, but I would rather have felt it and been able to guess what the Resuscitators were up to.

I pushed my eyes as far to the left as I could, and I could just barely see Arlene's stomach and breasts in my peripheral vision, but I heard her whimpering softly. I knew they did the same horror to her as to me; I knew I had failed to protect my lance—and my best buddy. I knew I was a dead man, not just in the dim and distant future, as were we all, but there and then, that moment. I knew I had thrown away the last hope of mankind, but I didn't even freaking care, because I had a freaking catheter up my nose and shoved into my brain, and mad alien scientists were about to suck out my soul, an entire termite hive of Dr. Mabuses.

I closed my eyes. We had failed to stop the Newbies, and now they would head straight for Earth to "fix" us. The failure was beyond my ability to rationalize, and my faith wavered. What was the argument for God that the nuns taught us, the "necessity of faith"? They taught me in catechism class that Man must believe in God, for not to believe meant we lived in a soulless billiard-ball universe where there was no reason, no reason at all not to rape, pillage, and murder so long as you got away with it. Jeez, I wonder if they knew how right they were … but for a completely different reason: Man must believe in something, for not to believe opened us up to spiritual invasion by Little Green Men from another planet. "Goodbye, Arlene Sanders." I gasped, spitting out the blood that still flowed. "For God's sake and your own, don't lose faith. I'll be with you always—and I got the message about Patrick." The Res-men made no move to shut me up; I don't think they cared whether I talked or not.

Arlene groaned, out of sight to my left. “Good—goodbye, Bro’. Semp… semper fi, Mac.” The Marine Corps motto: Semper fidelis, always faithful. I smiled. She understood the terrible stakes, amazing for a child who wasn’t raised a Catholic. Luther was right, I thought. Salvation is there for everyone. A bright white nova of light flared inside my head. It expanded like a “data-bomb” inside my brain, an infinitely expanding pulse of pure white noise; in moments, it overwhelmed every program I was running, and I couldn’t string another coherent thought together, the last being Patrick. Then even the meta-programs were overrun; the last to go was the “I,” the ego that was nothing more than I Exist, and for a timeless interval—I didn’t.

I awoke in a strange, familiar place I had seen once before, but couldn’t possibly be seeing again. I awoke on Phobos; I awoke in the mouth of the UAC facility;

I awoke at the start of my mission, months and centuries ago. And deep ahead of me, I smelled the sour-lemon stench of a zombie, I heard the first distant hiss of a spiney.

It had started, God, all over again. I was alone, standing at the gate of hell with nothing but a freaking pistol in my hand, a standard-issue 10mm, and a grounded land-cart at my feet. Behind me was—how did I put it the first time?—a blank empty desert silhouetted by a barren purple sky. I was back on Phobos, where hell began, and hell had started all over again! Even the inadvertently traitorous Ninepin had deserted me; I had no idea where he had got to, but he was gone.

Okay, so am I going to do this the hard way? What did the Resuscitators want me to do—go all the way down, down eight levels to the heart of the UAC facility, jump into the mouth of Moloch (as dead old Albert Gallatin named it) and find myself on Deimos? Jump back through the hyperspace tunnel and end up orbiting Earth again?

I swallowed hard and started jogging down the long empty corridor, the sour-lemon smell growing stronger with every step. I heard a hiss behind me. Drawing the 10mm and spinning in a single fluid motion, I found myself facing the same leaky pipe that had jerked me around the last time.

“Goddamn it!” I snarled, feeling my pulse beat so hard in my head that it felt like hammer blows. I shoved the semi-auto into the holster on my armor and continued my walk-about, slowly and carefully this time.

I vaguely remembered what—who—was next, and he didn’t disappoint me: when the corridor narrowed, and I began to hop lightly over the first green tendrils of toxic goo that slithered across the floor, I heard plodding footsteps ahead. Out of a swirl of smoky mist, the flickering lights casting hideous shadows, shambled the pale corpse of William Gates, still a corporal… I guess hell didn’t believe in promotions. His wide-spaced eyes and scarred cheek were unmistakable; it was dead Bill, the zombie-man: “The Gate is the key … the key is the Gate….” I didn’t bother trying to talk to the man—he was long past any sort of conversation—but as I raised the 10mm, I abruptly remembered Arlene’s silent message. Patrick, what the hell did that mean? Patrick converted the heathens… How could I convert a zombie, for God’s sake? It had no brain left! I gritted my teeth and squeezed off two rounds into his forehead; I could barely fight the compulsion to turn my face away or close my eyes … not again, not bloody again!

No more blood. I shot my buddy dead again, and once again his body flopped on the floor like a headless chicken (I butchered a hundred chickens when I was a boy; they really do that, it’s not a goof). But when it was over, I didn’t feel the same revulsion as last time. It was just a simulation—emulation?—and it wasn’t really happening all over again. The Resuscitators were studying my reactions. Well, Christ, I’d give them something to study. As I stepped right over the body, fighting down my own panic, I casually leaned over and spit on my friend. When in doubt, confuse the hell out of the enemy—a maxim to live by.

I snagged the Sig-Cow he was carrying—ooh-rah, the 10mm, M211 Semi-automatic Gas-Operated Infantry Combat Weapon that was standard issue with Marine Corps riflemen. I never liked it much, preferred a semi-auto shotgun or the M-14 BAR I’d been using recently; but it was distinctly better than a 10mm pistol, and I knew what was coming: up ahead waited three zombie-men and a zombie-chick, ready to open fire on me.

Knowing what was coming emboldened me; I don’t know what the Newbies thought they could learn from such a stupid emulation.… It wasn’t

the same at all—last time, I didn't have a clue what was happening, and I was particularly freaked by the obviously demonic nature of the monsters that attacked me. But now I knew what they were, mechanical constructs of the Freds. And I knew I really wasn't there at all; I was inside a vast computer with a blindingly fast clock rate. An hour for me was actually, what, a minute of real time? A second? Fast enough that the real enemy, the Resuscitators, could watch without their short attention spans inducing terminal boredom.

But it was hard not to be fooled by the perfect looming walls, the slippery floor, the hissing, bubbling toxic slime that dripped from barrels and spilled across the floor. I deliberately bent and dipped my little finger in the goo and was rewarded with agonizing pain, like putting out a cigarette on bare flesh. The pain was real; pain was all in the head anyway, a neurosignal in the brain's pain receptors! I should have guessed that a simulated brain would have simulated pain before sacrificing my finger to the slime god.

Pushing the pain to the back of my mind, I squirmed forward between standpipes and fungus-grown walls, ducking under low overheads and hopping over an obstacle course of metal gratings and hoses. I remembered just what the terrain looked like when I was nearly ambushed; this time, I was the one who fired first, as soon as the four shuffled into view. I plinked them from cover, taking down three before they crossed even half the room, killing the girl last. I flipped the bodies onto their backs, stripped them of everything useful, and continued: something told me that I had to reach the first spiney, the brown demons with spines growing everywhere. If I could duck underneath the flaming balls of snot he loved to hurl, I could at least talk to him… Hell, I already did—once.

I came to the room with the sabotaged radio and the incinerated map. No matter—the floor plan of the facility was burned into my brain, either by the sheer horror of the memory or else by the Resuscitators when they resurrected me here. Didn't need the map, in any event, and the radios were useless inside the RAM of an alien computer. I felt like I'd been drafted into a computer game, jerked by electronic strings like a meat puppet.

Killed three more zombies, just like the last time; I was ready for them, they didn't know exactly when I would be among them. It was a slaughter, like

shooting drunks in a barrel. I didn't get sick, since I knew what they were—not just zombies, but electronic simulations of zombies. But I was getting as bored as hell, and distracted … and that was a bad thing; I was starting to worry at Arlene's code. What did she mean by "Patrick"? Did she really mean I was supposed to convert the demons inside the Newbie machine?

Convert them to what? Good Catholics?

I wanted to catch up with the spiney who lurked in the room with the huge spill of toxic waste; at least that bastard could say something other than variations on "The Gate is the key." I scurried on through the twisty maze, almost seeing a ghostly overhead view superimposed over the black-dark, dripping-dank corridors, wide shadowy rooms, and sagging ceilings. An awful sickening odor overpowered the sour-lemon smell of the zombies, and I knew I was close.

Then I saw it: the room I'd been hunting for, the vast sea of toxic spillage that looked like bubbling lava on Saint Patrick's day—huh, mere coincidence? I stayed well back, out of the room itself, and scanned for the particular piece of equipment from which the spiney charged me last time. It was tough, since I hadn't seen it coming, but I found the only console in the place large enough for one of those gigantic, two-hundred-kilogram beasts to lurk.

Pointing my Sig-Cow, I spoke in a loud command tone. "All right, you spineless spiney, I know where you're hiding.…" To prove my point, I pounded a couple of shots into either end of the console. "Come out now, before I have to put a round into each of your kneecaps."

Nothing happened. I fired six more rounds into the console, right about where I judged the thing must lurk, and it hissed in pain—one of the shots must have passed right through the electronics and winged the mofo.

That was enough. The beast slowly emerged, hideous and stomach-turning, with a stench that would drop a carrion-crow at a hundred meters. The spiney was unmistakable: brown, leathery, alligator hide, ivory-white horns out of every body part, inhumanly huge head with mad red slits for eyes. It stared at me, advancing slowly, then it stopped and hocked a loogie into its

hand. The snotball burst into flame when the air struck it, and the spiney raised its arm to pitch a high hard one right across the plate.

I leveled my rifle. “If one drop of that fiery snot leaves your hand, you will be dead before it hits that back wall!”

The spiney stared resentfully, then slowly let the fireball fall to the ground, where it sizzled out in the toxic waste, in which the creature stood up to its ankles. Thank God that green goo wasn’t inflammable!

“My friend,” I said, thinking of Saint Patrick, of the Emerald Isle, “you may think I’m here to blow your fool head off, and I might just do it yet, but that really isn’t why I came … and you’re not here to kill me, no matter what you might think.

“I’ve got a little something to tell you, and you’re not going to like it one bit, but if you just take a deep breath and a stress pill, I think you’re going to be a whole hell of a lot angrier at someone else than you are right now at me.”

It stared at me for a full, long, solid minute, during which both of us maintained cacophonous silence. Then, strike me down if I’m lying, the spiney spoke to me! “Sssssspeak,” it hissed, “we sssshall lissssten…” The eye slits narrowed, but blazed brighter, if anything. “We will lissssten … once.” The spiney waited, flexing its huge claws, for me to come up with something terribly clever.

15

The Newbies are being blasted by their own petard, I realized. In the real world, the genetically engineered spiney never would have paused in its attack to hold a philosophical discussion with me, but we were in a computer emulation, taken from my memory—and human memory is amazingly creative. We remember things not as they really happened, but the way they should have happened, the way that actually makes sense. The brain is a gifted storyteller. “We are all greater artists than we realize,” or whatever the hell that guy said, whoever the hell he was. Just then I distinctly remembered the spineys being much more rational and logical than they probably were in reality; yes, sir, I made damn sure that was how I remembered them. So that’s what I got; it was like a so-called lucid dream, where you know you’re dreaming … except, I was never able to do that. But this time I was wide awake—and so long as I made sure I remembered things the way they ought to have worked out, I had an edge the Resuscitators couldn’t take away from me.

“I know what you are,” I said to the spiney, “and I know who created you. And I know who destroyed your creator. You want to join forces and kick some ass?”

It hissed in rage, yellow mucus dribbling down its chin. As each drop cleared the skin, the air ignited it; a chain of fiery islands dotted the ground around the spiney’s splayed feet.

“Don’t give me that crap,” I warned. “You’re a product of genetic engineering, created by a race of creatures we call the Freds, who have heads like an artichoke, if you know what that is—covered with colored leaves—and grow taller and smaller as part of their mating cycle. You’ve seen them, right? Is my description right on, or what?”

“Ssssspeak!” demanded the spiney, but it closed its mouth, swallowing the rest of its spittle. I took that as a good sign. “You know they’re members of a grand galaxy-wide conspiracy of philosophical-literary criticism that is

reasonably well-translated into English as the Deconstructionists. They're fighting the other school, called the Hyper-realists. You were sent here to prepare us for invasion and conquest by the Freds, and they told you that we would roll over and beg for mercy if you came looking like our ancient demons, right?"

The spiney hunched lower and lower as I talked, its eyes glowing deeper red, but the stench that accompanied the beast grew stronger, not weaker. Watch it, I warned myself. It's not submitting … it's getting angrier and more devious.

"Sssssssssssso? What plansssssss do you have?" "But your masters screwed up, spiney. They didn't tell you we would have guns and space travel and a well-organized resistance. Did they? And now you're bloody terrified, because the situation is totally out of control."

The last part was a total wild speculation. For all I knew, the Freds never even engineered the emotion of fear into their puppets. But it was a good chance. After all, they sure as hell demonstrated anger and senseless rage, the way they would turn on each other at the slightest provocation, and in the racial enmity between, say, pumpkins and the minotaurlike hell princes. If I had to guess, I'd say the Freds started with alien stock that already kind of looked like what they wanted and already had emotions.

"Kill you!" screamed the spiney. "Kill you all! Death to humansssssss!"

"Spiney, your masters were wiped out. All of them, the entire race. They're gone! Would you like to know who did it?"

It stared at me in confusion. Clearly, I wasn't acting the way it thought I would, or the way the Freds told it to expect. The damned thing was utterly nonplussed, totally at sea—and most of us react to that sort of confusion with fear and rage. I guess, in its own way, the spiney was just another jarhead dumped behind enemy lines, where it turns out the brass-holes got everything butt-wrong, as usual.

"How … would you know thissss?" it asked. Thank God I was remembering a logical rational spiney! It stood up slowly from its crouch,

muscles relaxing, but still a mask of suspicion covered its face. Its lip still curled back, baring huge tusks, and it alternately clenched and loosened its fists. “Look, this is the hard part to accept—but none of this is real. You’re probably real; at least, I think I am, and you might be, too. The scum that killed your masters, the Resuscitators, are Newbies who aren’t even part of the Great Game: they’re neither Deconstructionists nor Hyperrealists, and they don’t give a damn about any of your literary theories of the universe.

“They created this computer simulation to study something about me and … and my race, and you just got swept up with the study. Capice?” It hissed at me, long and loud. So much for sweet reason! It changed its mind and decided to charge; I must have stupidly let my mind drift back into a different sort of memory of spineys as remorseless killers. But before the spiney could pounce, it had to crouch. I had a bead on it already, and I squeezed off two shots—both into the creature’s hip. The spiney went down hard, clutching its hip and screaming in agony. The hip was destroyed, the rifle rounds tearing the flesh apart and pulverizing the bone. The creature wasn’t going anywhere for a long time, not without surgery.

I stayed where I was, just crouching with the rifle and waiting until the spiney thrashed itself out and lay exhausted on the ground, spent and paralyzed by pain and fear. “It doesn’t have to be this way,” I cooed, like I was talking to a six-year-old who insisted on stealing cookies and getting walloped. “The simulation is based on my memory; I can remember things a little differently.” I looked at the creature’s ruined hip and visualized a different outcome. One trick I learned at the Chapel of Mary and Martha’s was “How to Lie Successfully,” a course taught inadvertently by Sister Lucrezia. The secret—

I’ll give it away for free just this once—is you actually have to convince yourself that the lie is really the way it really happened. Got it? If you broke a vase by playing football in the lobby, you just have to visualize the alternate scenario (you tripped over an extension cord and knocked over the lamp) so intensely that your memory of the fantasy is stronger than your memory of the reality. Understand, now? That way, even if the penguin whips a galvanic skin-response lie-detector machine out from under her habit, you’ll still pass … because by now, you’ve totally convinced yourself

that the electric-cord tripping is really and truly the way it happened. Honest injun. “Yeah,” I said aloud. “I knew I only creased you with that shot. Lucky thing, too.” The spiney slowly sat up, rubbing its hip in pain—easy pain, the pain of an annoying bruise. It bled copiously, but the wound was a light scratch—nothing like the terrible, hip-shattering shot it could have been in a hypothetical, alternate universe.

“Starting to sink in yet?” I asked.

The grotesque spiney then did the most horrific thing, sinking to its hands and knees and crawling slowly toward me. When it got within two meters, the spiney fell to its belly and slithered forward like a lizard, arms splayed but legs pressed tightly together, like Jesus on the Cross but facedown in the glowing acid. It squirmed close enough, then it pressed out its long yellow tongue, gently flicking at my boots the way a lizard tastes the wind for scent—predator or prey?—and everywhere the tongue touched was left a thin sizzling streak of glowing embers. My boots were crisscrossed by fiery marks of obeisance. The spiney stretched its arms wide, feet long to the south, face down in the grime of the floorplates: it offered itself to me, drooling fire and sweating oil from the glands along its back. The oil probably protected it from its own flaming mucus, but nobody was there to protect me from my new servant. Not even Arlene. “Ssssslave,” hissed the spiney.

“No, you’re not anybody’s slave—”

“Masssster!”

I ground my teeth. There was something fundamentally wrong about this conversion. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go! The spiney was supposed to wake up and take charge of its own life, not pick me to be its God instead of the Freds!

Still, I had to play the hand I was dealt. “Look what the false ones did to you!” I trumpeted. “They left you here to be hurt and set you against—against your true master!”

“Falssse onesss!”

“They turned you against me, and now they must pay! Death—death to the false ones!”

“Death to falssse onesss!”

“That is our mission, our holy mission—destroy the false ones!”

“Misssion dessstroy falssse onesss!”

I winced and made a mental note: Try not to use so many S’s around spineys! “And the second—and the other thing to do is find the other mistress, Arlene.” “Find missstressss.”

“But, Christ, where is she?” I wondered out loud. In the first reality, I found her only after jumping from the first site of destruction on Phobos through the Moloch gate to Deimos. We found each other, both naked and trembling, in a room with an inverted cross stamped out of red-hot metal. But if she had any brains, and no one’s ever accused Arlene Sanders of being stooopid, she would stay put where she found herself and wait for me to find her, too. Well… if she could stay put; circumstances might make it tight. “Get up, slave,” I said. I decided to play the game to the hilt, if that was what the spiney needed. But I couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling that maybe the Newbies programmed the monsters to be gullible, susceptible to my conversion—like Ninepin, this one seemed awfully easy to convert! Maybe that’s exactly what the Newbies wanted to study. Was I giving away intel to the enemy?

Hell, what else could I do? Couldn’t bloody well fight them if’n I died in the simulation, could I? The spiney rose, towering over me, but I lowered my Sig-Cow anyway. If it wanted to jump me, it would always have opportunity; just then, I chose to assert my authority by force of will alone. “Tell me your name.”

“Sssslink,” she answered; from that moment, Slink was a female to me. “Sssslink Sssslunk.” “Slink Slunk. You’re my first convert, the first apostle. We’re going to have to gather an army, since I left mine behind in, um, heaven.”

“Sssslink learn power ssssoon?” Power? She must have meant the power to affect the “reality” of the simulation.

“Sure, kid, soon. Now lead us downward. I want to get this crap squared away. Step one: we’ve got to find Arlene … the other person like me, the other living human. Can you smell us?”

“Sssslink can ssssmell,” she confirmed. Slink stared around the room suspiciously, still tasting the air with her snaky tongue. She didn’t seem to trust it, sipping it like fine wine, as if it bore scents warning her of dangers lurking below us.

“Smell her out, Slink. Find my lance. But along the way, you’re going to have to work with me to convert as many others of your kind to our cause as we can. Got that? No fighting or killing unless absolutely necessary.”

“Ssslink underssssstandsss.”

I started to ignore the hissing, which was probably caused by her forked yellow tongue. I remembered where the ladder was that led down to the next level, and I remembered a stadium full of zombies with rifles and shotguns, and more spineys who might not be as accommodating, between us and the ultimate level of Phobos, deep below. I remembered what waited down there: a pair of hell princes. I was not happy about facing them again.

We continued through the acid room to a long corridor, and there we, as a pair, met our first hosts of the undead. Three zombie girls shambled forward, one of them topless and missing an arm, the other two UAC workers—all armed with weapons stolen from Fox Company Marines who didn’t need them anymore. Slink held up her hands. “Sstop!” she commanded. The zombies paused, obediently. Damn, that’s right, I thought. The spineys have some sort of mental control over the zombies.

“Thiss not real. Massterss dead. Join forcess, kill Newbiess!”

The conversion was not a big hit among the zombie gallery. Maybe the original spineys had psychic control over the reworked humans, but evidently when Slink converted to my cause and accepted the unreality of

her world—mostly because of my demonstration, I realized, not by faith—she lost her ability to tap into the Psychic Freds Network. The damned zombies just wouldn't listen to her!

The one-armed topless girl raised her hand. She held a five-shot revolver—nothing serious unless she got truly lucky with a shot. But I wasn't about to wait for her to start plinking. Before she could squeeze off a round, I pointed my rifle and fired one shot from the hip. At that range, if I'd have missed, I would have turned in my Marine Corps T-shirt. I took her amid-ships, sinking her in her own wake.

There was a time when I would've felt disgust and revulsion against myself for shooting a woman. I longed for such a time; now I felt only grim joy at having cut down another undead monster. The other two zombies opened fire, unperturbed by their companion's obliteration. I dropped behind an ornate rosewood trellis left over from when this section of the UAC facility was a visitor's center. Fortunately, these undead were proving to be just as bad a pair of marksmen as the ones in real life; it probably had a lot to do with the fact that they never blinked, and their eyes were perpetually so dry they could barely see.

I dropped to my butt to steady the rifle—couldn't expect too many bursts of luck firing from the hip—and fired a round into the farthest of the two (she had the better weapon, some sort of bolt-action rifle; the other had a shotgun and was too far for it to be effective). If I had any doubts about my new convert, I buried them; she hocked and spat into her hand, then hurled the flaming ball of snot into the face of the shotgun-toting zombie-gal.

The shotgunner screamed a combination of pain and rage and started firing her shotgun in our direction. A few of the pellets struck me and burned like hell, since I wasn't wearing armor yet. I don't find it until the next level down, I remembered. But I stuck to my plan and pumped three more rounds into the rifle-gal until she finally dropped before turning my attention to the shotgun zombie. By then, she was dead, burned into a blackened corpse by Slink Slunk, my first apostle.

When the battle abruptly ended, I sat still for a long time, head bowed. God, I prayed, can You really make me go through all this again? I took a deep

breath and stood, a Marine again. “All right, if that’s what has to be, then it has to be.” But what would happen in the Resuscitator simulation if I died?

Damned good question: can a spirit that’s nothing more than bits in a huge computer go to heaven? Or would my death mean my absolute obliteration? “Screw it,” I muttered. Marines are riflemen first and philosophers never. “Come on, Slink, let’s get the hell out of Dodge.”

I led her through the long corridor between the trellises to the door that led to the ladderway down. The next level was Godawful, as I recalled: a black-dark maze, spineys galore, and maybe even the first pinkie—the horrible demons who were all mouth, bigger even than the mouth of doddering old Mick Jagger; he was threatening a comeback tour when Arlene and I upshipped from Earth, six months and three hundred and fifty years ago… I wondered if he still was?

I won’t go into every freaking battle of every freaking level; if I could believe Overcaptain Tokug-havita, it’s already been thoroughly documented, and everybody who might be interested has already read about it in school. It was the same game, the same terrain, but this time, I gathered converts like a snowball. It was never the majority opinion. Slink and I were pretty soon joined by four other spineys (Whack, Sniff, Chomp, and Swaller), a pumpkin named Olestradamus, and even, God help us, a zombie that used to be Pfc. Dodd, the man that Arlene once sacked out with for a few months. In the previous version of reality, we ran into Dodd on Deimos, not Phobos, so I knew my abused brain was playing games with memory.

The architecture was even more movable than before, since now it needed only the whirr of computer software, not hydraulics, to slide walls up and down, to open floors beneath our feet, even to shift entire sections of the UAC facility from one side to the other. My goal remained the same as before: find Arlene! But now I had a different plan once I found her. Somehow, we had to find a way for the ghosts to break out of the machine. I swear to Almighty God, I promised, that I will not die in software limbo; Hijack my way out of this place, me and Arlene, and get my ass back to the real world! The only question was whether I’d manage to do it before the Newbies “fixed” the entire human race.

Slink, the other apostles, and I lived on medikits and snarling blue spheres; I ate the food thoughtfully left behind by the UAC workers and my own comrades of Fox Company when they gave up the ghost; I didn't want to think about what my followers ate. The only real advantage to being back where it all began—in simulation, at least—is that I didn't have to worry about amino acids and vitamins and whether or not Fred food or Newbie food was edible by humans; I didn't have to monkey with food-supplement pills, purify water, or eat lumps of so-called "food" that looked like overgrown escapees from a box of Lucky Charms. Blue squares! Orange squares! Pink dodecahedrons!

When we climbed down to the third level, what felt like half a day after I first appeared for the second time at the mouth of the overrun facility, we were greeted by a welcoming committee of five spineys, several zombies, and even one of those spectral ghosts that sounded (and smelled) so much like pinkies, even though we couldn't see them. I finally had my biggest question answered: how in the world, in this world, would Slink and Chomp and my other spiney converts fight against others of their kind? So far as I could tell, their flaming snotballs had no effect on each other due to the oily and obviously flame-retardant secretions from the glands along their backs and chests.

We dropped heavily from the ladder into a whole frigging pool of the toxic goo, and I actually felt it eat quickly through my boots and start in on my feet. I ran like hell across the mess—right into the waiting embrace of the defenders of the faithless. I fell back against the wall, firing off shot after shot from an over-and-under I had liberated from ex-Corporal Magett. When the last shell was exhausted, I dropped the shotgun and unslung my Sig-Cow. I couldn't see my buddies. I thought sure as hell I was going to renege on my promise to the Almighty about not dying in this limbo.

Four spineys—I had killed the fifth—swarmed me, and I took three flaming mucus balls to my face; my skin felt like it was parboiled off'n me, and I couldn't see for crap. I raised the rifle and fired blindly, wishing I could cry—apologizing over and over, under and under my breath, to Arlene—another Fly failure! Then one of the huge brown monkeys screamed in agony and whirled to face its attacker. It was Pfc. Dodd, Arlene's ex,

screaming in his unmistakable high-pitched voice, unchanged even after reworking; he shot it again with his own Sig-Cow. I forced my eyes open a bit wider to aim a round and planted it deep into the spiney's brainpan. Two down, three to rip me to pieces.

But suddenly the other three spineys came under assault from a rain of huge sharp stones! I dropped to my ass to avoid the bombardment—it was a veritable intifada of my spiney apostles!

I guess they figured out that their snotballs wouldn't do anything to their heathen brethren … so they started ripping chunks of masonry out of the walls and using that as a weapon! God, faith was already working miracles on the spineys' thought processes. They drove their enemies back and back, killing two of them. One was knocked silly, and we later converted him—he's the spiney who called himself Swaller. When they were all dead, fled, or better bred, Slink and Chomp, who were starting to become an item, hunted up a blue sphere for me. They cradled it carefully on a piece of plastic camouflage netting they stole from a dead Marine's helmet and smooshed it into my face, thank Christ. I went from zero to sixty in 1.2 seconds, and I actually felt human and alive again. Meanwhile, Whack and Sniff rounded up all the unexpended rounds of ammo they could scrounge.

Days passed—it sure seemed like days, but maybe it was "really" only a few microseconds—and I was already in the habit of drawing a huge question mark over any time indicator and writing subjective time! beneath it, ever since Arlene and I started flitting around the galaxy at nearly the speed of light. This was just another example of relativity, I reckoned. But it seemed like days to us, and that's all I can say: days passed, and we were finally ready for the last descent into the final horrific level on Phobos. We were about to come face to face with our first hell princes—and the gates of Moloch that led to a whole new limbo on Deimos. I hesitated at the top of the long, long ladder that led down nearly a kilometer into the crust of that tiny moon Phobos. Phobos means fear, I remembered, though I didn't know what the significance was. "Okay, boys and girls," I said. "Are we ready to rock 'n' roll?"

They nodded. Swallowing hard, wondering where in this world I would find Arlene Sanders, I put a foot and hand on the ladder and began the long

descent into blackness. Below me I heard an inhuman scream that still, after all and everything, caused my stomach to contract and my sphincter to clench. I recognized that scream.

16

We climbed down a ladder so tall I got vertigo and almost dropped off to my death. I led, my gaggle of monstrapostles spread above me. The ladder was at least a kilometer long, much longer than in the real world—if that was the real world the first time—obviously taken from a bitter, scary, nightmarish memory. At the bottom of the ladder was a small open elevator—a wire cage into which we all piled. It ground downward, scraping the walls of the shaft and groaning in agony at carrying so many.

I started to get the shakes as the elevator led us into the high shelf-room; below us, I remembered, was a whole herd of pinkies. And so far, the pinkies had turned out not to have enough brains even to listen to my conversion speech. Maybe they were pre-verbal; I certainly couldn't hear any language in their snarls, grunts, and screams of rage or pain.

Sighing, I bellied up to the edge of the floor, looking down on the churning floor that was actually a couple of dozen pink mouths-on-legs wandering around the room, squeezing past each other, tripping and shuffling together, every so often screaming and chomping on one another. I sighted more or less along the barrel of the over-and-under, which didn't have a forward sight, and squeezed off the first round. My spineys joined in, throwing snotwads, while Olestradamus and Dodd shot over the spineys' shoulders. Between the seven of us, we spread pinkie guts all over the room, leaving nothing after two minutes but the hot quivering corpses of twenty-five pink demons. My ears rang from the banging of the firearms, just mine and Dodd's, but it was close quarters, and the room echoed with every shot. The acrid stench of fricasseed pinkie burned my nostrils and throat, but at least they were all dead.

I hopped lightly down the shelf and onto the killing floor. My cohorts thudded down like a herd of elephants. We headed down the corridor toward the final elevator, the one that led down to our old friends, the hell princes.

Just before we got to the lift, we passed the infamous crack where I'd seen Arlene's skull and cross-bones pointing out the way she'd gone. I stopped and stared wistfully, wishing I could see my buddy again. Was she in her own version of the Phobos facility? Or was she still somewhere ahead? Last time, I'd found her in the first room in the Deimos installation, where I jumped after finding the Gate.

This time, I turned away sadly and started up the corridor. As I walked past the crack, a powerful alabaster demon suddenly darted its hand through the crack and into the traffic lanes, grabbing me by the arm! I jerked back out of its grasp, raising my shotgun and hissing for backup.

A vision of violence shambled out of the hole: savage bestial eyes, tendrils red as blood atop the head, dirt and less palatable contaminants caking the body. I jerked my scattergun around to unload a shell into this unholy new creature. But before I could squeeze the trigger, the bestial shape spoke, urgently whispering, "Don't shoot, Fly! It's me! It's A.S.!" The perspective shifted, and I was staring at Arlene Sanders in the flesh. When she saw the shotgun leveled at her. she squealed like a mouse, then dove for cover, but I was already dropping the mouth of the weapon and rushing forward to yank her out of the crack.

She held her shotgun half to the ready, panicked eyes flickering back and forth between me and the passel of imps, a zombie, and one pumpkin in my wake. "What the—what the—Fly, what the hell is this crap?" Arlene's face was drained of blood; she was trying really, really hard not to simply open fire on the "mortal enemies" at my back!

"Hold your fire, Lance. Meet… your new platoon. Fly's Freaks." Suddenly, I thought about Dodd; while Arlene was reluctantly approaching Slink and the other spineys, I quietly leaned over to Dodd and ordered him into the shadows. I didn't know how Arlene would react; Dodd was the zombie that used to be—

"Jesus, Fly," she said, "you sure can pick 'em." We held each other for a few seconds, reveling in the quiet reunion of two soldiers deep behind enemy lines. Then I sent Slink ahead to watch for the hell princes and asked

Arlene what she had done for the past two days since appearing in this horrible maze. “You’re going to laugh,” she gloomily predicted.

“Laugh?”

“It’s really stupid.”

“Hey, I’ve got an idea—instead of reporting on your report, why don’t you just give me your report?” “Oh, thanks, Sweetie, pull rank. All right, but you’re going to freak.”

I put my hands on Arlene’s hard, almost masculine shoulders. “Kiddo, I’m going to tear you apart like a wishbone if you don’t spit it out. Where have you been the last two days?”

“Here.”

“Yes, yes, in the UAC labyrinth. But how did you get this far? I barely did it last time—more luck than anything else. How did you make it without a scratch?”

“No, here here—right here, where you’re standing.”

“You appeared here?”

“On this very X.”

I stared, confused. “But why? I appeared back at the entrance.”

“Why?” she asked, turning the spotlight back on yours truly.

“Hell, I don’t know! Ask the goddamned Newbies.” She smiled and turned up her hands. “How should I know why I appeared here? I knew you only had one way to go—down—so I figured I’d just sit tight and wait, rather than stomp all around the place and risk maybe passing you in the dark.”

“The pinkies didn’t smell you?”

She laughed, a musical tone not too different from a silver glockenspiel. “Of course they did! They’ve been up and down this freaking hallway so many times, I’m surprised they didn’t dig a trench with their feet. I just ducked inside my hole here whenever I heard them coming; they’re not exactly light on their feet.” We looked up the corridor to where Slink hovered at the doorway, her ear cocked for the sounds of the minotaurs at the center of the labyrinth, the hell princes. Even from where I stood, I heard them screaming and growling, stomping up and down. “They can tell there’s something wrong nearby,” I whispered in Arlene’s ear, “but if they really knew we were here, I think they’d already have come charging out.”

“They didn’t charge me last time I was here, and I made a lot of noise. Didn’t notice me until I went through that door and down the stairs. I think they don’t hear too well, and they’re used to a lot of noise from the pinkies anyway.”

“But they smell something, right?”

Arlene wrinkled her freckled nose and grimaced. “Mainly what they ought to smell is spiney! Don’t take this wrong, Sarge, but your new platoon stinks to high heaven.”

I looked left and right along the dank stone hallway, stones piled on top of each other without any sign of mortar or cement. I looked at my platoon—not as good as Marines, sure, but could anyone do better? “This is what you meant by saying ‘Patrick,’ isn’t it?”

“Patrick? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Just before the Newbies sucked our brains out. You looked at me and said ‘Patrick,’ and I figured you meant to convert the monsters, like Saint Pat converted the Irish heathens.”

She lowered her orange brows, not following the turn of conversation. “I said ‘battery,’ not Patrick, you idiot!”

I glared in annoyance. “You didn’t mean I should convert the demons?”

Arlene waited so long I thought she had fallen asleep. “Fly,” she said at last, patiently, as if to a child, “how would I have known the Newbies were going to send us here?”

“Oh,” I said, face turning ruddy, “I guess I didn’t think of that.”

“I said battery—find the battery, the power source.… There has to be some connection, a hard connection, between the RAM we’re running in as programs and the bus, the motherboard, whatever you want to call it; the thing that everything else plugs into!” I shook my head. “How do you know they use that kind of configuration in this computer?” “I don’t know, but they probably use something like it! This intense and fast a simulation—remember what the Resuscitators said about wanting everything to move fast?—that sucks a lot of juice. Basically, the faster you want to go, the more energy you need, and it’s got to come from somewhere.”

“All right, so there’s a power source. So what? We can’t shut it off—we’d die.”

Arlene blew air out her closed lips in exasperation.

“We don’t shut it off! That’s our key, that’s the door… If we can piggyback the datastream that defines us inside this simulation onto that energy flow, we can back out of this freaking place and into the rest of the computer, maybe even into the operating system of the Resuscitator ship.”

“You think we’re on the ship? Why?”

She shrugged, looking so much like Arlene I got chills. “What else are they going to do, hang around the rock we just left? What’s Skinwalker to them? It’s probably just the nearest planetary system to Newbie prime. Why else would they decide to come here?” “Well… the Newbie we had on the Disrespect was part of the invasion fleet that wiped out the Fred; what if… what if they came to Skinwalker for a more important reason?”

“What?”

“Maybe they came here in search of us?” She stared, not saying a word, so I continued. “Maybe they picked up some mention of us and our so-called nonbiological status, and how much that scared the Freds, when they annihilated them. So then they went out hunting for us. Maybe they knew this was our nearest base; maybe there was some record among the Freds.”

“Couldn’t have gotten here in time. We came on a lightspeed ship—no message could come faster, and there was no settlement here when we left Earth, anyway.”

I shrugged. “They were on their way here, though. Our prisoner said so!” Arlene slowly shook her head, eyes closed, then she massaged the bridge of her nose. No question, this really, truly was my buddy; every mannerism was exactly right. The Arlene Sanders in this computer world wasn’t just an alien program designed to fool me: somehow, the Res-men really had built a device that sucked her soul out and trapped it here. Until I had found her, I had my doubts.

I stared up at Slink, who looked tense but not frantic. Evidently, the gruesome red fiends were still agitated but hadn’t yet decided to investigate. “Hey Lance, you really want to charge through that door and fight the hell princes?” I asked.

“Not particularly, Fly-boy.”

“How’s about we set the spineys and the zombie to making this crack wide enough for all of us?” Arlene raised one eyebrow—an expression she had practiced night and day for months because of some television character who did it. “Highly logical, Captain.”

I recoiled in horror. “Good God, don’t commission me as an officer! Officers have to go to college, and you know what I think of college grads.” She ought to; I’d only spelled it out a thousand times! See, at Parris Island, I was an assistant DI when I first made corporal. You give a recruit an order, and even if he doesn’t understand it, he will, by God, run off and try to do something.

But Gunnery Sergeant Goforth used to be a DI over at Quantico in the Marine Corps Officer Candidate School, and he told us that when he gave an officer candidate an order that the kid didn't understand, he would stand there like a dummy and try to clarify it! "Sir, this candidate does not understand the drill instructor's order!" Gunny Goforth went bugfreak trying to get the candidates to do something, anything, anything but just stand there and discuss the situation!

The gunny especially hated, when he gave an order, the sort of rummy way the candidate would just say "sir?"—with a look of utter bewilderment—like he'd never even heard of such a command. Like no one had ever heard of such a command … like nobody in his right mind would ever dream of issuing such a bizarre command! "You falkin' piece of shee-it! Just falkin' pick up th'falkin' FOD off'n th' falkin' RUNway and don' falkin' say another falkin' 'SIR,' or I's gone to rip your falkin' HAID off and YOU-rinate down yo' neck!" Gunny Goforth was from South Carolina, and his hatred of college-educated officer candidates was legendary.

It was the college education; I was morally certain of it. They say college teaches you how to think, but I think it really teaches you how to jerk gunnery sergeants around by the short hairs.

I whistled very low, catching everyone's attention. I set Olestradamus to guard the door instead of Slink, and all the spineys—and Pfc. Dodd—came forward to tear down the wall, or enough of it that we could all escape the way Arlene did last time. I'd deliberately kept him in the shadows. I wasn't sure how Arlene would react to her former lover, now zombie. I wished I could have softened the blow somewhat. Maybe I handled it all wrong. When Arlene saw Dodd, she turned white, paler than usual, so much so it was easily visible in the gloom. She fell back against the wall and started hyperventilating, staring at him. This wasn't the first time she had seen Dodd as a zombie. We caught up with him the last time on Deimos, just after jumping through the Gate—the same Gate that was just outside the crack we were working on. That time, he shambled out of the blackness ready to blow us apart, reworked so thoroughly he didn't even recognize his once and future intended.

I was sick back then, sick at heart. I knew I would have to kill the SOB, and Arlene would hate me forever, and hate herself for hating me when I only did what I had to do. But a miracle happened, the first one I'd seen on that trip, but not the last. Arlene suddenly found it inside herself to shove me out of the way and kill zombie-Dodd herself; that way, she couldn't really hate anybody.

It was a hell of a thing for her to do, one of the reasons I love her so much, my best bud. Now … what did this mean, now we had Pfc Wilhelm Dodd as one of our crew? But a Dodd who not only didn't remember sleeping with Arlene and loving her, but also didn't remember being killed by her. But Arlene remembered, God help her. She remembered killing her boyfriend. She blew his head off and watched the body topple like a dead tree.

"Christ," she muttered beneath her breath, closing her eyes and turning away. "Christ, Fly. Did you have to run into … into him?"

I didn't know whether Albert made it easier or harder. She had thought she loved Dodd until she met Albert Gallatin. But maybe her feelings for Albert were colored by what she'd done to Dodd, and what we all were sharing: the destruction of our planet and our entire race. At least, I knew those thoughts were firing through her brain; if I could think them with my limited mental capacity for speculation, sure as hell Arlene was obsessing about them herself. She swallowed the emotions down and became a Marine again. Dodd wasn't Dodd; he was a zombie … and now a platoon member. She did what she had to do. She was a U.S. Marine—semper fi, Mac. The spiney imps got busy ripping away at the masonry; Arlene and I tried to help, but human hands simply weren't strong enough to do the dirty work. We caught stones as they fell and lugged them away, trying to make as little noise as possible; the pinkies were damned noisy as a rule, and the hell princes should be used to the noise … but still, the last thing I wanted —

We almost, damn near made it. Slink and the other spineys—Whack, Swaller, Sniff and Chomp—used their iron nails to grind away at the crack, scraping stone away. It was already wide enough for me and Arlene (and Dodd, of course), and nearly so for the imps, but the pumpkin Olestradamus

was a big problem: I snapped my fingers until I got his—her?—attention and gestured it over. “Can you deflate?” I asked. It didn’t say anything but looked puzzled. “I mean, is there any way you can suck in a little at the sides, like, and squeeze through that crack?” Olestradamus floated closer to the hole and stared through it. The pumpkin had not yet spoken; I only knew I had converted it by the fact that it no longer opened its mouth and spat lightning balls at me. This is how the scene happened: we’d been battling the pumpkin in a small room, Slink and Chomp and I, taking cover behind a stone couch built for some gigantic monster with a really hard butt. While the pumpkin floated to each corner of the room, firing lightning balls at us from every conceivable angle, we screamed out our spiel about the simulation. I almost bit my tongue in half when Slink shouted out, “Masssster sshall produce miracle! Then you sshall know!” It wasn’t exactly like I could just close my eyes and envision a vase of flowers appearing in the middle of the room! What was I supposed to do, suddenly “remember” that the water in the fountain was really wine?

Sure, kid, sure, that would be great… only it didn’t work that way. I couldn’t “remember” something so totally different because my real memory got in the way. Maybe if I were one of Arlene’s religious teachers, the ones she was forever reading about—

Bodhisatvas, something like that—maybe I could perfectly visualize a Fredworld where pumpkins were only beachballs, imps were crash-test dummies, and the pinkies all wore monkey suits and served cocktails.

But I was just Flynn Taggart, and I had too good a memory to play that game. Alas, I remembered just how bad-tempered the pumpkins were … and this one was proving how damned good my memory was with every electrical belch. I wished that somehow Sears and Roebuck had been transferred with me; I sure could have used those gigantic Magilla Gorilla arms to pop that overinflated monster.

And then an astonishing thing happened. While the pumpkin was floating around the blue-glowing room, with flickering light from several shredded light tubes, it managed to wedge itself into the small space between the stone couch and a shred of illuminating panel on the ceiling. Trying to

extricate itself, the pumpkin managed to rotate so that its mouth was pointed directly skyward.

Then, in frustration, seeing us in the corner of its peripheral vision, so close, touching distance—the dweebie pumpkin fired a round … directly up into the powerful circuitry. The short-circuit in the light tube must have acted like a capacitor, because there was a violent spark-flinging feedback loop, and the pumpkin ended up taking a jolt that must have been a hundred times the amperage of its own lightning, judging by the acrid smell of ozone.

The zap scrambled every neural circuit in the pumpkin's brain. It must have blown through all of its metaprogramming, letting me reach right down into the deepest part of its brain and convert it on the spot—like it had seen God directly, that's how it responded. I turned it, we became friends. Turns out the things can talk, they just don't have much to say (too full of hot air, hah hah). Their voices are at the extreme low end of the frequency range of a human ear. Olestradamus sounded like Darth Vader played on a tape running half-speed.

But now I waited expectantly for Olestradamus to answer. After a long moment staring out the crack, it rotated to face us and sadly said, "N-n-no. C-c-c-ann-n-not fit." I wondered if I had the only pumpkin who stuttered, or if that were a racial characteristic of all pumpkins.

Olestradamus rotated to return to its post and froze: standing in the doorway was a hell prince. The freaking thing had finally decided to go upstairs and check on the weird silence … and with amazing foresight, it had chosen the exact instant that the door was unguarded!

The hell prince recovered before I did. It raised its arm and fired a blast of the greenish energy beam from a wrist launcher. But Olestradamus was faster! I wouldn't have believed it possible; I'd never seen a pumpkin move so quickly. But it was in between us and the hell prince fast enough to catch the blow meant for Arlene.

Olestradamus screamed in rage and pain, and returned fire with the lightning balls. I turned back to Arlene. "Move your gorgeous ass, A.S.!" Unceremoniously, I grabbed her by the butt and scruff of the neck and

propelled her through the hole, dumping her face-first a dozen feet down into what sounded like squishy mud.

“Slink, Whack, Chomp, Dodd—punch it, through the gap!”

My apostles squeezed through the gap, which was almost wide enough for a spiney, and followed Arlene to the ground. I hoped to hell she had shaken off enough daze to roll put of the way before the two-hundred-kilogram spineys dropped on her head. I leveled my shotgun, we were at such close quarters, and tried to get a shot around Olestradamus, but the pumpkin was too fat, too round! It and the hell prince were going at it—well, I was going to say fang and claw, but I guess it was actually mouth and wrist launcher. God, but the two races must have hated each other. But why? I remembered seeing hell-prince bodies lining the walls of one pumpkin chamber and dead deflated pumpkins strewn about the floor of another hall owned by hell princes. I guessed the only two creatures that hated each other more were steam demons and the spidermind.

They were both pretty torn up. Olestradamus blocked the entire passageway, and the hell prince effectively filled the doorway, which was a good thing, because I could just glimpse the second hell prince behind the first—but he couldn’t get off a shot around his compatriot.

“Come on, forget it!” I bellowed. “We’re through… Pull back and hide—convert your brothers!” But Olestradamus didn’t hear; it was too busy teaching its mortal enemy what it meant to incur the wrath of a pumpkin.

And then I heard the sound I most dreaded: the flatulent noise of an inflated pumpkin popping, meeting its airy doom. Olestradamus collapsed into a huddled heap of rubbery flesh on the floor. It belched no more lightning.

We had our first martyr on the holy quest to punish the false ones.

I stepped back into the shadows of the crack. The stupid hell prince had gotten so fixated on killing its race enemy that it had entirely forgotten about me and the rest of the crew. It staggered forward, obviously ninety percent dead on its feet.

I was happy to supply the missing tenth. As it crouched unsteadily over the body of our loving Olestradamus, the most intelligent inflated floater I had ever known, I raised my duck gun and unloaded a shell at point-blank range into the hell prince's temple. I only wished I still had the beloved double-barreled shotgun I had carried through the entire campaign on Earth.

I guess Olestradamus must have torn up the hell prince more than I thought. I expected the creature to be hurt; but hell, one just like it had taken a shot directly amidships with a rocket, for Pete's sake, and lived. But this one didn't; it dropped heavily, groaning … and ten seconds later, it was dead, green blood and gooshie brain goo dribbling out its head. The other came charging out, but it was too late; I stepped back once more, launching myself through the crack and down about five meters to the wet peat below. I fell hard, stunning myself. As I came back to consciousness a moment later, I found I had made a giant-size mud angel.

The hell prince stood at the crack and tried to fire through it, but we ran under the overhanging piece of building, completely unhittable. Thank the devil our intrepid imps hadn't made the hole any bigger; the hell prince was only just barely too big to fit. Arlene steadied me, and I told the crew what had happened to poor Olestradamus. Arlene made the same point about him, her, it being a martyr, and I explained the concept to Slink for later processing to the other apostles.

Above us was sky, horribly enough; we had come down more than two kilometers through the solid rock of Phobos … and here, at the bottom, directly overhead we saw the stars! It made no geographic sense, but, of course, it didn't have to—it was nothing but computer software, after all.

Across the field, I saw the raised platform that was the Gate. I pointed. "Well, men, I hate to say it, but if we're going to find that power source, we'd better get the hell off Phobos."

Arlene raised her eyebrows, then shrugged. "Well, sayonara, Phobos. And I was so looking forward to a more extended visit."

Yeah, right, A.S.

17

Marines are like cats. They sleep lightly, half an eye peeled for charlie, sniffing the air like a huge carnivorous tiger that's always hungry. They can fall asleep standing up, in zero-g, during reentry, even while marching on the flipping parade ground. Don't ever try to sneak up on a Marine; Jesus the Anointed One walking on the water makes enough racket to jerk a Marine awake from a sound sleep. And when a Marine wakes up, he's on his feet in one fluid movement, rifle in hand, fully alert in less time than the fastest microprocessor takes to execute a single machine-code command.

Except me, that is. Fly Taggart wakes up not remembering his own name, bleary and groggy, eye-lids glued shut with little pieces of sleep. I stagger like one of the Fred-worked zombies with a mouth full of cotton, inarticulately begging and pleading for some life-giving coffee. Usually it takes two recruits and a burly Pfc. to slap some sense into me in the morning. This time, it took a scared lance corporal. Arlene snapped me out of my coma by the simplest possible means: she started kicking me in the ribs, gently at first, getting harder and harder, until at last I blindly reached out a meaty ham-fist and caught her ankle in mid-kick. Without waking more than halfway, I jerked her off her feet and snarled something about not tickling a man when he's trying to get some Z's. Then I blinked awake. I sat up on a blue-specked dirt patch overgrown with clumps of sharp, brittle, blue grass that seemed to undulate, though I couldn't quite tell for sure. Arlene picked herself up, brushing the dirt from her uniform and rubbing her knee. "Damn you, Sarge!" she stage-whispered. "I was just trying to get up quietly."

Taking my cue from the lance corporal, I kept my own voice low. "What the hell is going on? Last thing I remember, I was strapped to a table and the Newbies were trying to suck my brains out with a vacuum cleaner."

I stared around. Arlene and I sat atop a small hill that faintly rippled. In the distance, I saw the human-built ship, the Disrespect to Death-Bringing Decon-structionists. It was even smaller than I imagined, utterly dwarfed by

my memory of the Fred ship. I would still love to see them side by side, though. The Disrespect looked far sleeker and more elegant. In all other directions was a flat plain, broken only by immensely tall thin trees. They swayed so easily, though, in the faintest air current, that maybe they were just very tall grass.

Blue was the color of the day. I knew for a fact that the desert we had walked across from the Fred ship was brownish gray, with not a trace of blue. I bent down and looked close at the ground: the blue specks that colored the entire terrain were actually tiny bugs! Almost microscopic insects swarming over everything—over me and Arlene, even. I cringed for a moment; I've always hated bugs. But there wasn't anything I could do about it, and I didn't feel any pain. Alas, even Ninepin had deserted us. I had no idea where he had got to, but he was gone, the inadvertent little traitor.

"Arlene—"

"Yeah, I know. You can't even brush 'em off; they're too small. I figure they must eat microbes, so maybe they're not all bad."

"Arlene, where the hell are we?"

She shrugged. The blue critters in her bright red hair turned her head purple. "Near as I can deduce, Fly, the Resuscitators tried to suck our souls out; my nose still hurts like hell."

Now that she mentioned it, I realized my own sinuses felt like some combat engineer was cranking a hand drill inside. "But we're still here—I think. Do you feel any different?"

She shook her head. "Nada. Whatever kind of soul I had before, it sure feels the same now." Then she turned her head and squinted in the direction of the ship. "On the other hand, would we even know if it was changed?"

I started to stand, but she put out a hand and held me down to a crouch. "Fly, they're down there, bottom of the hill."

“Who?”

“Your converts—the fourteen still left alive who didn’t despair and get reinfected. Sears and Roebuck are down there, too—their bodies. The freaking Newbies killed them to shut them up—they wouldn’t stop arguing about them using the machine, and then when the Res-men started sucking out your soul, S and R actually attacked them!”

“Jesus! Kill anyone?”

“I couldn’t believe their strength. Their little legs spun like a gyroscope … you know how they chug so fast, their legs are just blurs? They dashed around the room at high velocity, breaking necks and crushing skulls with those powerful Magilla Gorilla arms of theirs. It was beautiful!”

“How many did they get?”

“At least eight Res-men murdered while they stupidly tried to aim their shots. You can’t hit something moving that fast by aiming at it!”

“You got to lead it.”

“Yeah, but which way? Sears and Roebuck kept changing direction so fast, I thought I was looking at a UFO! So finally one of the Res-men must’ve got an infusion of brains from the Newbie molecules infecting her, she grabbed a laser cannon and just held the trigger in while she swept the beam back and forth across the room, fast as she could. Did you know Klave can jump like mofos?”

“They can probably run up the walls, with the speed they’re capable of.”

“But she finally got them. Cut the boys down on the downbeat.”

I blinked. Man, I’m out for five minutes, and look what I miss! It was like going out for popcorn, and when you get back, the giant ants are already devouring Austin. “Christ, then what?”

“Then they finished with you like nothing happened, and they started on me, and I woke up here. I was lying next to you, but you were stiff as

granite, even though your heart was beating and your lungs breathing. I figured you were brain-dead … and I guess that's what Tokughavita thought." "How do you know they're all down there?" "How do you think? I'm Marine Corps recon… I crawled to the edge of that ridge and reconnoitered. They're all down there in a circle—looks like they're performing some sort of shamanic ritual. They're bobbing their heads like pigeons."

I crawled as quietly as I could to the ledge she indicated and looked down on our converts. I recognized the overcaptain and several of the boys. "Shamanic ritual? Jeez, Arlene, they're praying. Haven't you ever been to church, you heathen?"

"That's what I said, a magical ritual." She squirmed up beside me. I couldn't help smiling, she felt so good. "Wonder what the hell they're praying for?"

I stared at her, exasperated. "Probably for the safe return of our souls to our bodies, you moron." She raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. "Man … are you trying to tell me that stuff works?" "Worked this time, I reckon. Come on, babe, let's go down and scare the hell out of the natives." We had nothing better to do, so we rose and descended majestically from the mount. When we were almost down, one of the converts shouted and pointed; his mouth moved, but no words came out. In three seconds, the rest of them had scrambled to their feet and were staring silently, stunned and awed. I stopped where I was and spread my arms. "Behold," I declared. "I have risen from the dead. Let this be the reward for your unwavering faith!" I felt a prickling in the back of my neck. I didn't dare look up… I knew what it was: God the Angry Father was glaring at me for my blasphemy. But it was in a good cause! We had to keep their level of faith high, so if there were any molecular Newbies floating around, they couldn't get a toehold. Somehow, strong faith, faith in anything, seemed to stop them. Maybe it created some sort of chemical imbalance? Hell, that was for the college creeps to figure out. I just wanted to fight the bastards!

Toku and the Converts—didn't I see them at Lollapalooza?—swarmed us like locusts on a wheat field, and Arlene kept pushing them back so they wouldn't mob me. "Chill, chill, you clowns! Get your asses back over the

line—I want you to stay at least four paces from me, or I pull out the nutcracker!" The two of us got them simmered down enough for Tokughavita to tell us what happened after Arlene and I were killed. "Didn't know what to do," he explained, turning up his hands. "Said you were dead, souls gone. Believed—saw no signs of life in eyes!" "I don't get it," I said. "Did the thing work, or didn't it?"

"Took bodies down from tables. Resuscitators gave them to us, said they were meat only, no further use. Cast us out, said we were unfixable, ruined. Called faith ruin and fatal flaw in operating system." I smiled. I could just imagine the Res-men's frustration. Suddenly, they were locked out of what had been their comfortable home, the human mind, for the last God knows how long! If I were any judge of character, the bastards were really running scared now. "So they're still in there?" I nodded at the ship. "Yes, master, still present, but cannot get at them.

Activated all ship's defenses."

"So he drove out the man."

It was a sweet voice.…

"And he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." I turned to Arlene, nonplussed. "I didn't know you knew the Bible."

"I, uh, I don't. I just know that verse. I must have heard it in a movie or something."

"Activated launch sequence," continued the over-captain. "Ship launches in thirty minutes. Should get to cover, otherwise we'll be burned black." The other remnants of the Fearsome Flies grabbed all their stuff and bundled it up, but I caught myself wondering: if Arlene and I hadn't awakened just then, would these goofs have sat right there, while the ship launched and burned them alive? I winced at the thought; they had faith, but I obviously needed to work a bit on the common-sense aspect of religion. We stood over the bodies of Sears and Roebuck. From where I stood, the wounds didn't look all that bad … but where I stood was a million klicks away from

the medical lab on the Disrespect. Yet we couldn't just leave them there! If their bodies were burned, not only would their spirits be irrevocably lost, left to wander the barren dunes and blue bug-covered plains, but they would feel every microsecond of the incineration … and they would remember.

"Jeez, Fly, that was a hell of an act of bravery on S and R's part. I mean, here we are, hundreds of light-years from the Klave homeworld. They must have known the odds were slim to none that we'd be able to resuscitate them." Arlene crouched, staring cautiously at Sears and Roebuck, unlikeliest of heroes. An idea was starting to germinate in my brain. "Toku, you guys got a hovercar or landrover or something down here?"

He looked puzzled, scratching his chin. The hirsute overcaptain desperately needed a shave; he was starting to look like a chimpanzee balancing on its hind legs. "Don't know. Different department." Yeesh, here we went again with the ultraindividualism! I gathered them around us in a circle. "All right, you proto-jarheads, did any of you drive a vehicle off that ship?" Silence, many heads shaking. Arlene put her hand on my arm. "Excuse me, Sarge, you're not asking that right. May I?"

I waited a moment, eyes flicking back and forth, then I grunted assent.

"Dudes," she began, "did any of you see a vehicle on the dirt here?"

Instantly, half a dozen hands went up. The crewmen started talking all at once, but they quickly compared stories and pointed along the axis of the ship, heading aft. "About three kilometers," explained the overcaptain.

I wanted to strangle the entire lot of literal doof-uses! Drive it off the ship … Jeez! I glanced at Arlene, who said, "Come on, Fly, you know which of us is the better runner."

"Take off, kiddo, and for God's sake, make it the fastest 3 K you've ever run. Wait, which of you is really fast?" Every hand shot skyward. I rolled my eyes. These guys were worse than the natives on the island where everyone either always lies or always tells the truth! "Look, I know each of you is the fastest SOB in the outfit… so every man point at the second fastest dude."

I had fourteen converts: six pointed at one guy, four pointed at another, and the other two pointed at each other. The two winners were startled by the sudden attention and didn't point at anyone. "Right, you and you, follow Corporal Sanders. Move out!" I sat down to wait, trying my damnedest to look completely calm and patient. In reality, I was about ready to chew the heads off a bag of ten-penny nails. I was still waiting in exactly the same posture, having forced myself to be utterly still, when Arlene and the boys "drove" up twenty-one minutes later in a hovercar. By then, everyone was nervously sneaking peeks at his watch—except Overcaptain Tokughavita, the only man with utter, absolute faith in me. He knew I wouldn't let them down, even if I had no control whatsoever over the search for the land cart! The cart was pretty similar to the one I'd used on Phobos a couple of centuries ago, except it was big enough to collect a few tons of samples. The cart was huge and blue: ten meters from stem to stern and two meters wide, with a foldable gate around the bed. It liked to sit about six meters above the deck, maintaining altitude with some sort of air-jet arrangement, instead of the fans that levitated the land carts on Mars. The engine looked complex, and it was totally exposed, not even a cowling; I couldn't make head or tail out of the guts. It was nothing like the fan-levs I had taken apart in the Pendleton motor pool a few years and a couple of stripes ago.

An engineer named Abumaha was watching the ship, and he announced that the tail had begun to smoke. That meant we had all of three minutes before the ship blasted into orbit.

"All hands, throw everything onto the land sled, don't worry about the order —move!"

Arlene and I took personal charge of the bodies of Sears and Roebuck, carefully laying them atop a nice soft pile of clothing and coats. The boys (including two girls) leapt aboard, just as the tail of the ship suddenly turned too bright to look at with the naked eye. The Res-men had fired up the fusion reactor. "Arlene," I said softly, "get us the f out of here, okay?"

She jammed on the throttle, and I was hurled to the deck. One crewman almost tumbled out the back, but Tokughavita caught him by the hair and the scruff of his neck and hauled him back aboard. One minute later, we were already half a klick away … and the darkening sky suddenly lit up as

bright as a dozen suns. The Disrespect was launching toward orbit. We ran fast, faster, but the Shockwave caught up with us nonetheless. It rocked the cart so viciously that Arlene backed off the throttle and pulled up to a halt. Good thing. With the second jolt, I was hurled out of the land cart! I hit the ground heavily, too stunned to stand, but not too stunned to laugh at Arlene's attempts to settle the hovercraft onto the ground to pick me up.

The ground shimmied and shook beneath me, so I stayed on my butt, my back turned to a fusion reaction bright enough to burn out my retinas in a millisecond. At last, she got the thing onto the ground, scooped me inside, and headed away again. Behind us, the ship cleared the lower atmosphere, and we stopped hearing the roar of exploding gases around the engine nozzle, hot as a stellar core. "Where to, O Exalted One?" Arlene asked.

"Where do you think? Back to the Fred ship so we can repair Sears and Roebuck. If any two can figure out a way off this rock, they can. And Arlene … change drivers, huh? I wouldn't mind getting there intact."

18

“No, no, saw them! Saw you in computer.” Overcaptain Tokughavita was struggling to convince Arlene and me that the Res-man soul-sucker really had worked as advertised.

“But we’re not in the freaking computer,” explained my lance with amazing patience, for her. “We’re sitting in this stupid hovercraft, listening to your drivel about us being sucked out of our bodies and plopped into a computer.”

Tokughavita groaned, leaning his head back and raising his arms in perhaps the most prototypical human gesture of them all—cosmic frustration. “Then who did see? Saw both of you in computer, fighting monsters right out of book.”

“Book? What book? What the hell are you—” “Knee-Deep in the Dead and Hell on Earth,” I answered for the man. “The books that Jill wrote. They’re talking about the monsters that the Freds genetically engineered for us on Phobos and Deimos—you know, the spiney imps, steam demons, spiderminds, boneys. All the things that made life worth killing.”

Arlene stared at me, mouth open. “We were fighting steam demons? In the computer?”

The wind was harsh but not strong enough to blow me down again. The driver had cut the speed, now that the Res-men had lifted off in the Disrespect. The guy was a convert named Blinky Abumaha who used to be a fusion technician, damned useful if we were ever going to get off the rock. I stood up, facing toward the front, my face rubbed raw by the mini-gale, kicking up sand so fine it felt like a bad sunburn as it pocked my skin.

“Arlene, leave him alone. I think Toku is telling the honest truth.… The damned thing really did work.” “Come again, Fly-boy? Maybe when you fell out, you landed on your head.”

“It really did pull our soul out… but the Newbies, who are driving this technology revolution, they don’t know any kind of soul but their own—the standard soul in the galaxy. They only know the so-called biological soul, like Sears and Roebuck have, the kind that sticks around like a ghost in the body even after death.”

“You saying we have a different kind of soul?” “It makes sense, doesn’t it? A.S., we’re the only creatures in the galaxy who can die … and we’re the only creatures who have anything like faith. Of course our soul works differently!”

“So you’re saying when they used the machine …” Arlene faded away. I turned back, and she had her hand over her mouth, eyes wide behind her goggles. “I think you figured it out,” I said softly. “Fly, the machine duplicated our souls! There really is another version of Fly and Arlene out there, and they’ve got us back fighting the Fred monsters again. Oh Christ, those poor—ah, I was about to say—” “Those poor souls. Go ahead and say it, A.S. It’s literally true.” She spared me the echo, and I couldn’t get more than a grunt out of her all the way back to the Fred ship. In fact, my lance seemed lost in thought, not even staring at the fascinating scenery, klick after klick of barren gray-brown desert, the monotony broken only by sand dunes that flowed visibly across the surface, blown by the wind. The sand was so fine, it acted like a fluid … like ocean waves in slow motion.

“Bullet for your thoughts,” I said, as the gigantic Fred ship, torn into pieces by the crash landing, hove into view.

“You can’t figure it out?”

“I’m not a mind reader, Corporal.”

“You can’t add the Newbie device to Albert and get five?”

“Five? Five what?”

She shook her head, and I felt like a total idiot. Obviously, she was seeing something, but damned if I could guess what. “Come on, Arlene, you’re the sci-fi gal here, not me!”

She put her hand familiarly on my knee. “Later, Fly. Okay?”

I tried not to think of her hand sliding farther up my leg, but my body refused to cooperate. She must have somehow felt my mood; she removed her hand and snuck a quick glance southward. “Jesus, Fly, what’s got into you?”

“Just thinking about the shellback initiation on the Bova,” I lied. “When you came out in the pasties and g-string, you really gave me a woodie.”
“Really? Cool.” She smiled, then chuckled. “Remember the look on Albert’s face? I thought he was going to call me the Whore of Babylon! ‘Get thee behind me, Satan!’”

“Hmph. You ought to quote the real Bible, if you have to quote something.”

“You mean the Catholic Bible?”

“Imprimatur, nihil obstat. The very same.”

“All right, so how does the, ahem, real Bible say it?”

“It’s not in the real Bible, of course.” Arlene rolled her eyes and muttered some dark blasphemy. And then we were there, at the gaping mouth of the Fred ship, the aft end of the final forward piece. Blinky Abumaha drove the hovercraft right inside the crack, forward as far as he could through the wrecked empty cargohold where we had whiled away many simple hours training and shooting at imaginary Freds. Then he parked the car, and we all piled off and started hoofing it forward, “through caverns measureless to man.”

We pulled short at the first medical lab we found. During the time we had spent on the ship, the weeks heading toward Fredworld, then the weeks we followed the spoor of the Newbies to this barren place, Sears and Roebuck had finally, reluctantly, showed us a little bit about working the various machines and devices. I wondered if they realized that their own lives would someday depend upon how well they taught, how closely we observed?

We slapped their bodies up on a pair of tables, and I took my first really close look since we found them dead in the circle of apostles. One of them —don't ask me which—had a deep but cauterized beam wound across the chest. Cause of death: severe trauma to the left heart, severing of the greater and lesser aortae. The other Klave in the pair had beheld a beam in his own eye. (I had no idea whether anyone else had picked up a mote.) The thin beam fired straight through his retina into the head. "You know," I said, pointing at the wound, "that shouldn't have been fatal."

Arlene looked incredulous, so I explained it to her. "Klave don't keep their brains in their heads; it's under the stomach, here." I tapped the point of the triangle formed by the Magilla Gorilla body, just above the stubby legs that could work so fast the human eye couldn't even see them.

"Well," she said cautiously, "did he maybe die because the other one died?"

I shrugged, nodded. "I can't imagine one dead, one alive; maybe they couldn't either."

I felt for pulses in all the most likely spots. Neither gorilla was alive by any test I could think up on the spot. "Come on, you apes," I said, "you wanna live forever?"

Only Arlene laughed. I guessed that two hundred years hadn't treated Mr. Heinlein kindly. We folded up the massive arms of the Klave with the heart and aorta damage and shoved him into one of the machines, the one that was supposed to repair the gross physical damage in major organs. If we could get them up and relatively functional, they could probably take over the finer points of surgery themselves, stuff like the eye damage and the numerous burns and ribbon lacerations.

The machine looked like a huge chest of drawers, with the bottom drawer big enough for a Fred, which meant nearly enough for a Klave. We managed to stuff the hairy gorilla into the thing anyway, but I was almost at the point of severing one of the arms and letting Sears or Roebuck reattach it later. Fortunately, it didn't come to that. S and R might be totally ice when it came to mutilating bodies, but that wasn't taught in Light Drop Combat Tactics School. I twisted the dials in the upper left drawer to indicate

“circulatory system”—the Freds used visual icons, fortunately, since I didn’t speak Fredish—while Arlene cycled through a seemingly endless catalog of different species, looking for Klave. “Jeez, Fly, there’s no end to them! It’s like that party scene at the end of that stupid movie, The Pandora Point, where six million different aliens swarm the place, and Milt Kreuger has to make them all cocktails he never heard of.”

She almost selected one version, but I pointed out that the most distinguishing characteristic of the Klave was that they were always paired. The icon she found showed only a single entity—“you can’t tell me the Freds don’t know that much about the Klave after six million years of warfare!” So she continued the cycle, and eventually she found the correct species—as I predicted, even the icon showed them doubled. “Okay, we ready to rock ‘n’ roll?” I asked.

“Hit it, Tiger.”

I took a deep breath and punched the button marked with a large up-arrow; it turned from blue to yellow. The devil machine began grinding and scraping. I shouldn’t have been surprised. It was Fred technology, after all, so of course it sounded like a brake failure at the end of the universe. When the bellows finally stopped pumping and the Jacob’s Ladder stopped sparking, the go button turned back to blue. A pale wisp of smoke curled from the bottom drawer, and I heard a muffled yelp. Arlene and I wrestled the drawer open. Inside was a living Klave, blinking rapidly and trying to focus his eyes. Arlene unlatched the side of the drawer, and either Sears or Roebuck tumbled out onto the deck. The overcaptain and the other converts stepped backward at the sight of the mighty Klave. Evidently, they had never seen one this close before we showed up, and they were still nervous about the massive arms, barrel chest, and tiny squirming legs. The patient staggered to his feet, staring around in confusion as if looking for something he had lost. He spied it and ran to the other table, making peculiar whimpering noises deep in his throat. He ignored me and everybody else; he had eyes only for the other member of his pair. I started to worry. If this was how Sears (why not?) was going to behave, how were we going to ask him to repair Roebuck? Then a miracle happened. I was getting pretty used to them by then. Sears (if it were he) stared so hard at

Roebuck's still form that the latter suddenly sighed, coughed up some blood, and spontaneously came back to life. "Well," I said, "it makes sense in a perverse sort of way: he pined away from loneliness, so now he comes back to life for company." We withdrew, all of us, and allowed the Klave a couple of hours alone together. Overcaptain Tokughavita kept us riveted with a blow-by-blow account of our mighty battle against the Fred-designed genetic monsters for control of Earth… I got utterly bored after the first five minutes. Either Jill got everything wrong or the overcaptain's reputation for a steel-trap memory was a PR scam! But Arlene found it fascinating, and respect for an officer, even one who thought I was the Messiah, forced me to sit quietly while he talked and talked and talked and talked. When he finally finished, Sears and Roebuck were fully cured and together again, and I was damned well informed on the subject of my own exploits a couple of centuries before.

I called a huge conference of all eighteen of us. Sears and Roebuck began formally introducing themselves; I watched with great amusement while they kept isolating every possible pair of converts (182 possibilities, according to Arlene) and reintroducing themselves, only to be utterly confused when one of the pair would insist they had just met. But I called a halt, so we wouldn't spend the next six years on intros.

"Boys—and girls, sorry you three—we're stuck on this rock, and there are two huge problems relating to that: first, unless we want to die here, we have to rescue ourselves; but, second, much more important, we have a mission to accomplish—we have to get after the Resuscitators and stop them from invading Earth, or, failing that, defend Earth from their invasion. Any suggestions?"

Everyone looked at his brother. At last, Sears and Roebuck gingerly raised a massive arm each. "Um, I can get I know a way up to orbit, but not farther there."

"How can you get us up to orbit?" asked Arlene, my personal Doubting Thomas. "You're not saying you can get this pile of dung to fly, are you?" "Certainly not! But I can get I know a way up to orbit, and it's with the escape-ship pod." I frowned. "You mean there's an escape pod on board? Powerful enough to boost us to orbit?" Sears and Roebuck looked at each

other, possibly “laughing” at my poor English. Klave were very arrogant about their language ability.

But Arlene was stuck in her cynical mood. “What the hell good does that do us? So we can get to orbit—yippie ki-yay. Then what?”

Overcaptain Tokughavita leapt up. “Battle fleet! Can take battle fleet from People Armed to Repel Invasion!”

“People armed what? What is that?”

“Is moon of this planet; moon is artificial, contains many and many interstellar ships.”

“Jesus Christ, Toku, why didn’t you bother to mention this before?”

“No use,” he explained. “Fleet inside moon, not on planet surface, like us. Irrelevant.”

I stood for a long moment, simmering. When I spoke, it was the cold, quiet, reasonable tone of voice that sent shivers up and down Arlene’s back. She knew what it meant. “Men, I’m going outside, find a steel ventilation grate, and kick it to shreds. I’ll be back shortly.”

It wasn’t just that latest round of idiocy; it was the entire setup. Was there ever anyone more put-upon than I? I found the grating, raised my boot, and gave it about six killer gruesome whacks, like Lizzie Borden with the ax. When I finally limped inside, I felt much better.

When I returned, feeling cleansed, I issued the necessary orders: “Sears and Roebuck, get that escape pod ready. Toku, Abumaha, you guys know how to unlock the ships and fire up the engines? Good, get your trash ready, then assist the Klave, if they need it. Arlene, ah, keep an eye on everyone else.”

“Gee, thanks a lump, Sarge.”

“That’s the price of being a junior non-com. When you get everything ready and you’re set to go, you’ll find me in the forward engine room, looking for Fred bodies to kick around.”

The Freds, it turned out, were not as crazy as their architecture suggested. They were very protective of their own safety, like the other races of the galaxy who expected lifespans in the hundreds of thousands or millions of years. In fact, they built life pods into their ships every few hundred meters! We had our choice of not one but three different escape pods, even in the section of Fred ship remaining intact.

Sears and Roebuck led the expedition along the outermost corridor of the ship. It was a royal pain: the Fred boat was never meant to sit on the surface of a planet; they figured it would always remain in orbit … hence, there was no provision for walking on what amounted to the ceiling of the ship! Everything on the ventral side was smashed beyond repair, of course, by S and R's creative landing, and the dorsal side was all upside down.

We jumped and banged at the hatch-open lever for what seemed like forever, and I ended up slipping and cracking my kneecap against a dead light tube that was supposed to descend from the ceiling, but now stuck up from the deck. Finally, S and R reluctantly hoisted Arlene up high, holding her face up against the hatch with their Popeye arms, while she worked all the crap to cycle the now-useless airlock. We hoisted ourselves up and inside. It was a hell of a tight fit; it was meant for about five Freds and was stuffed like a comedy sketch with eighteen of us (including two gigantic Klave, much bigger than the Freds even in their seed-depositing stage). We swarmed over one another like termites; now, if it had been me and seventeen girls, I could get into the possibilities. But I detested making inadvertent contact with other males, so I pushed myself into a corner and just observed.

Sears and Roebuck clumped up to the driver's seat, walking over people like they were rocks across a stream. They both squeezed into the side-by-side pilot and co-pilot chairs and started flipping levers and twisting dials.

The interior was very podlike: spherical, uncomfortable, dark and metallic, stuffed with nav equipment. It smelled like a mixture of machine oil and—sour lemons! Shades of Phobos and the zombies. One entire end was taken up by a huge bulge poking halfway to the center of the pod—probably the engine cowling.

“Preparing yourself for taking immediately off!” Sears and Roebuck warned—and without giving us even a moment to do so, they pushed the button. The whole freaking pod exploded. That’s what it felt like when it detached from the ship—a huge gut-wrenching explosion. People and gear flew everywhere, and something really hard creased my cheek. Arlene screamed, but it was more a yelp of surprise than pain or agony.

We rose like a bullet. As soon as we cleared the ship and started to fall back, Sears and Roebuck rotated the pod and kicked on the chemical rocket engines. They accelerated at only a couple g’s, enough to get us moving. My God, but they were loud! My entire body pounded, thumping at the resonant frequency of the frigging engines. I couldn’t hear a thing—the noise was beyond hearing. I plugged my ears (everyone did), but it didn’t help much.

Then the Klave flipped on the big boys, the fusion drive, and we roared away from the desert planet at an even eleven g’s. That was the end of my reportage. The humans all passed out, and by the time Sears and Roebuck revived us, we were coasting in zero-g—my favorite!—in a mini-Hohmann transfer orbit toward eventual rendezvous with the tiny artificial moon. Sears and Roebuck piloted like apes possessed, cheerfully informing the assembled multitude that “we should make able the moon just before out of running of reaction mass! Good damn chance!” Their quiet understated confidence was starting to keep me awake nights.

19

We hit the moon at “dawn.” Dawn is a location on the moon, not a time. It’s tide-locked, so each lunar day is an entire lunar cycle of fourteen days; you can’t see the terminator creep, as you can on Earth if you stand on a mountain and look east across a plain (at the equator, the Earth’s surface spins at about sixteen hundred kilometers per hour, a thousand miles per hour: circumference of the Earth divided by twenty-four). But the moon, smaller than Deimos, had an atmosphere! In the two hundred years since we’d been gone—or a hundred and sixty, actually; the moon was built forty years before and named People Armed to Repel Invasion, henceforth PARI—we humans cracked the secret of the gravity generators we found on Phobos and Deimos, the one final secret of the First Ones that no one else had figured out in millions of years of trying … but was it our achievement, or the Newbies’? When did they infect us?

PARI had a gravitational acceleration of about 0.4 g, enough to hold a thin breathable atmosphere. God only knew who built the original gravity generators around Sol and the other star systems; it was one of the biggest mysteries about which the Deconstructionists and Hyperrealists were fighting—somehow the cause of the split, or one of the causes, if we could believe Sears and Roebuck! But still, neither Arlene nor I had a clue why … something about schools of lit-crit and eleven freaking story fragments. The damned moon was deserted, like a ghost mining town in Gold Rush country. “Where are all the people?” I asked.

Tokughavita answered, unaware of the volumes his response spoke. “Joined ship when arrived, left with us to surface.” He had just admitted that the humans abandoned their post! There was only one reason they would have done that: the crew of the Disrespect had infected them … or vice versa.

We had to walk slowly across PARI. The atmosphere was about what it would be three-quarters of the way up Mount Everest, and even a slow walk left me panting and dizzy. The apostles weren’t bothered; they said they had been “rebuilt” for greater lung capacity, among other things. Arlene and I

exchanged a look. So that was why we'd had such a damned hard time trying to take down Overcaptain Tokughavita! I started to wonder uneasily what their lifespan was: they were super-strong, probably immune to most normal nonintelligent diseases, and engineered to survive on alien worlds … and they worshipped me as a God?

I hoped I never disappointed them. Men don't take kindly to fallen idols.

It felt bizarre to be walking across an artificial moon the size of a cue ball, feeling gravity almost half that of Earth. Directly ahead a couple of klicks was a tall tower. Only the top half was visible over the horizon. The rest of the surface of the moon was a jagged series of black and white stripes, like digital zebra paint; I couldn't see any other structures—but, of course, the entire moon of PARI was one gigantic "structure."

We made it to the tower from our touchdown point in just over three hours. The tower was actually three towers connected by numerous spans of metal ribbon—bridges I sincerely hoped I didn't have to pass, since they had no visible guardrails and were plenty far enough up to kill me if I fell, even in the low gravity.

"We, ah, don't have to climb up there, do we?" I asked Tokughavita.

"Not up," he insisted. "Going down. Going down to battle fleet."

"Fly," Arlene said, "you know what those towers are? They're elevators! You can ride them up out of the atmosphere, or most of it… Am I right, Blinky?"

She and the Blink-meister had gotten quite chummy lately; I was already getting nervous. "Yeah, yeah, right up!" he agreed with sickening enthusiasm. "Go up, fast, fast, make nose bleed!"

"Some other time, kids." I felt like my own father twenty years ago.

We reached the base of the middle tower, and Tokughavita walked up and—I swear to God!—pushed the down button to summon the elevator, like it was a highrise in Manhattan instead of a tiny artificial moon orbiting an

alien rock. We waited thirty-five minutes by my watch, while the floor counter slowly climbed through the negative numbers toward zero. When it reached that magic middle, the monstrous doors before us, big enough to drive an upright Delta-19 rocket through on its rolling launch pad, cranked slowly open to admit our party of eighteen. I felt distinctly underdressed; I should at least have been wearing a ten-story robot construction virtu-suit. Tokughavita scanned the array of buttons and finally pushed the one labeled C, with a little icon of a dot in the center of a circle—core, I presumed. My adrenaline level skyrocketed just before we plummeted.

We started descending slowly, but within a minute, we were accelerating downward so close to the gravitational pull that our weight slacked off to about one percent of normal, just enough to keep the soles of our boots touching the elevator floor. We dropped sickeningly for close to forty-five minutes, so I guess the elevator hadn't been all the way down when we rang for it.

At last, we started slowing hard. I was almost kicked to my butt, and Arlene actually did hit the deck with a thud. It was three g's at least! We stopped hard and fast in about five minutes, but we'd been toughened by our ship travels and we didn't black out. Sears and Roebuck took the acceleration in stride, literally: they kept pacing up and back, impatient to see the "battle fleet" that Tokughavita talked about. I figured this must have been close to the normal gravity for a Klave.

When the door cranked open, my breath caught in my throat. Before us was a mind-numbingly vast hollow sphere in the center of the moon, so wide in diameter I couldn't begin even to guess its size. It was crisscrossed by hundreds of thousands of striped tubes—catwalks, presumably, connecting different areas.

"Beware," said the overcaptain. "Is zero-g beyond elevator. Center of mass."

A tube beckoned directly ahead of us. I bravely led the troops forward, my stomach pulling its usual flippy-spinny trick as soon as we left the gravity zone and entered weightlessness.

Tokughavita wasn't kidding about the human battle fleet. There were dozens of ships strewn around the inside of the hollow moon, too many to get an accurate estimate. Some were as short as the ship that just took off; others were longer than the Fred ship we'd hijacked to Fredworld. The nearest was about one and a half kilometers long, I reckoned. Blinky Abumaha pointed at it and said, "Damn fast ship that is, nearly fast as ship we left."

"Nearly?" I got worried. I knew what that meant. He nodded vigorously. "Damn fast. Get us to Earth only twenty days behind infested ones, counting acceleration time, if leave now."

Twenty days! I figured that meant about a two-week acceleration up to nearly lightspeed and deceleration to match Earth velocity, assuming the Disrespect could get up to speed and back down in three or four days each way. Jeez, a lot can happen in twenty days; to the Newbies, it may as well be forty years, at the speed they evolved. "All right, ladies and gentlemen, let's haul butt over to the ship and stomp down on the kick-starter."

It was an easy "trek" to the nearest ship, provided you had a boatload of patience. Fortunately, that's one lesson you learn double-time in the Corps. No matter how fast we get our butts out of the rack and into our combats, pull on about a ton and a half of armor, lock and load enough ammo to sink a medium-size guided-missile frigate, and bounce out to the helo pad for a quick barf-bump to the rocket, sure as hell some 0-6 forgot his coffee cup or bis inflatable seat cushion, and we have to stand by six or seven hours while everyone from second-louie to short colonel turns the camp upside down trying to find it.

You know how to move as quickly as possible along a zero-g tube, don't you? You line yourself up as best you can right down the centerline and give a shove off'n one end. Then you wait. If you're lucky, you get a good long trajectory down the tube until you hit a side wall. If you didn't aim too well, you crash in a couple of dozen meters. Either way, you have to find something solid to brace against and do it again. The stripes along the tubes turned out to be metal bands with footrests to kick off from; somebody was thinking ahead … probably a non-com; an officer wouldn't have the brains.

I got used to seeing Pyrex glide past me on all sides, like I was a fish swimming through a glass sewer pipe. It only took us a couple of hours for the first guy, me, to make it all the way to the ship, but we were all spread out, and it took another thirty minutes to get back into a clump. I won't say into a formation, because the "Jetsons"-era clowns under my command didn't even know the meaning of the word. Turned out our little "reindeer games" on the Fred ship were good training. Arlene was especially grateful; she shot me a look of thanks when she cleared the transfer tube as "tail-end Charlene." This really wasn't her forte.

The ship we picked was long and strangely thin. I worried a bit about feeling cramped since we would be in it for five months. It was shaped basically like a dog bone, a klick and a half long but only a hundred meters in diameter; the endcaps were bulbous, giving the ship that "bone" look: one was the thruster, the other the feeder turbine for the scooped hydrogen. Damn thing was cramped inside. The corridors were mostly crawlways, and they were kept at 0.1 g, according to Blinky Abumaha. The cabins faced off the crawlways, all of them long and squeezed, like a bundle of pencils. Well, what the hell; we were beggars here, shouldn't get choosy.

Inside, pale teal predominated with orange trim—a decorator's nightmare. Arlene liked it for some weird reason, possibly just because it was about as far as could be from a Fred ship. I discovered that if I wore red sunglasses, they matted out the blue of the walls, making the effect odd but bearable. We dogpiled into the place and started examining controls, instruments, and engines.

Six of the fourteen had flown one of these types of ships before, and between them and the networks, we got the engines hot. The only problem was we didn't have anywhere to go! I couldn't see a hole in any direction—and neither could the radar.

I grabbed Tokughavita by his uniform lapel. "Okay, smart guy, how do we get out of this thing?" The overcaptain rubbed his chin. "Was afraid would ask question. Not sure, must consult mil-net." He typed away at a console for a while, frowning deeper and deeper. By the time another hour had passed, I had to forcibly restrain him from ripping the terminal out with his bare hands and heaving it through the computer screen. The damned thing

was command and menu driven—and Tokughavita didn't know the query command and couldn't find it on any of a hundred menus!

Arlene and I went on a hunt, trying to find the rest of our crew, who had scattered to the four winds, pawing through every system on the ship to find the stuff they knew. I snagged eight and Arlene got the rest, but no one had a clue where a tunnel was or how to open it up if we found it. They had all flown on these sorts of ships before, but none of my platoon was a starship pilot! I cursed the miserable Res-men for not being soft-hearted enough to leave us Ninepin at least! Traitor or not, he was a useful font of intel. I dismissed most of them and called a conference with Arlene, Tokughavita, the engineer Abumaha, and Sears and Roebuck. "Boys—and you, too, A.S.—there must be some kind of emergency exit here, just in case the worst-case scenario happened, and we had to deploy everything on hand immediately. Is there a set of instruction manuals, help systems, officer-training course … anything?"

Everyone shook his head. "I haven't seen a damned thing," Arlene said, "and I've been looking." "The designers wouldn't probably let such datums loose in the ships, in the event to enemy capture," Sears and Roebuck suggested with entirely inappropriate cheer. I guessed they were happy so long as no one was shooting at them, or likely to do so in the foreseeable future.

We kicked it around a bit, and everyone agreed we were all ignoramuses. Very productive meeting. Now I knew why officers got the big bucks. But something had been tickling the back of my brain through the whole useless disaster, something somebody had said. I ran back the conversations in my mind … and abruptly I realized it was something I'd said: I'd mentioned Ninepin. If only we had him—he knew everything, though his loyalty was a bit questionable! "Arlene, you remember what Ninepin said about how long it took to build him?"

"Now that you bring it up, I think it was something ridiculous, like four or five hours, wasn't it? Fly, you're not thinking of trying to build another one … are you?"

We stared at each other, struck by the same thought. “Toku, you remember that big green ball that followed us around?” I asked. “What was that?” From across the table, the overcaptain, who had zoned out and was looking out a porthole and picking his teeth, jerked back to attention. “Big green ball? Oh, yes, was Data Pastiche. Had it installed, hoped would pick up information about ancient human culture.”

“Yeah, yeah, and it reported back to the Res-men about us. Are these Data Pastiches common? Would we find one on this ship, maybe?”

Tokughavita shook his head. “Never saw before.

Was prototype. Never used, don’t know how.”

“Who would know?”

“Man who built.”

I sighed in exasperation. “Well, who else, since the man who built it isn’t here?”

Tokughavita looked puzzled. “Is here. Is Abumaha Blinky. Didn’t know?”

Arlene had been half listening, bored as the rest of us, but she jumped into the conversation with both feet. “Abumaha built the thing? Our Abumaha?” “Our Abumaha, Sanders-san.” Tokughavita slicked back a patch of hair that insisted upon curling around forward.

I leaned over and shook him awake, describing Ninepin, but Blinky didn’t have the faintest memory of building it! “Must jolly well have been under spell of Resuscitators, pip-pip.”

I spread my hands helplessly. “Well, did you take any notes? Draw schematics?”

Blinky’s face brightened. “Maybe, maybe, Jack! Kept data stack from way back, maybe used from force of habitat.” He disappeared, reappeared ten minutes later in high excitement. “Yes, yes, is on nodule, damn good lucky!” Sears and Roebuck seized the interval in between to escape with

their lives. I gestured to the engineering lab and we sealed Blinky Abumaha inside. The other five who knew engines prepped the ship.

Nearly a day passed, but there still was no word from Blinky. When I knocked, he muttered something incoherent and refused to come out, not even to eat. Sears and Roebuck had completely disappeared into the bowels of the ship—God only knows how they even fit through the passageways!—but they must have found a cabin far away, because we didn't see them again for the rest of the trip. The ship was fully set, waiting for the command, when finally the scuzz emerged, rank and disheveled, and rolling out behind him was …

"Ninepin!" Arlene and I shouted simultaneously. The little bowling ball was crystal-translucent this time, not green at all. It said nothing, merely rolled on past, right over my toe, to a console that controlled the compression field for the hydrogen—and incidentally interfaced the ship's mil-net. Ninepin II bumped into the bottom of the console again and again until I picked it up (it allowed me to do so) and placed it directly onto one of the nodule sockets. Ninepin glowed brightly for nearly an hour.

"He's downloading the entire freaking ship!" Arlene whispered in awe.

Then it stopped and announced, in a peevish, irksome voice, "Have finished inloading. Please replace on deck."

I picked him up and put him down, squatted over him, and started the interrogation. "Ninepin, do you know where the tunnels are to escape from this boulder?"

"No," he said succinctly.

"We can't get out?" Arlene demanded. "You mean we're stuck here forever?"

"Can get out, not stuck. Not tunnel, emergency escape separation."

I leaned over the ball. "Okay, Ninepin, listen closely. I have more seniority than anyone else in the service, so I'm in charge of PARI. I need to know

how to activate the emergency escape separation. Now how do I do it?”

Everyone—all the humans and Sears and Roebuck were still MIA—leaned close to hear the answer, but Ninepin wanted to verify my authority. “Taggart Flynn, born 132 BPGL; joined service 113 BPGL; time in grade, 263 years. Seniority confirmed. Rank: sergeant; command nonauthorized, higher ranking personnel present.”

We all turned to Overcaptain Tokughavita, who turned red under the attention. He cleared his throat, looking at me.

“Toku,” I said, “why don’t you give me the authority?”

He inhaled deeply, looking from one anxious face to another. Then he seemed to deflate, nodding in acquiescence. “By powers vested in me by Commons of People’s State of Earth,” he intoned, “hereby commission Taggart Flynn Lieutenant of Citizens of State.” My mouth dropped open, but Tokughavita wasn’t finished. “Hereby … resign own commission and resign Party membership.” He looked defeated, but determined.

The scream heard across the galaxy was my own. Despite it all—though I smashed the idea down a dozen times when some Fox Company chowderhead would suggest it, and ignoring my feelings in the matter—in the end, the damned Marine officer corps got its claws into me after all! My face turned purple with anger, and Arlene laughed her butt off. “So what is your first order, Lieutenant?”

Still flushing, I barked, “Nothing to you, Edith!” This provoked a new round of laughter from Arlene, so I gravely repeated my order to Ninepin: “The emergency escape separation, activation!” “Separation initiated at Lieutenant Taggart’s order,” announced the damned bowling ball. I swear, when I become king, all Data Pastiches will be annihilated.

Nothing seemed to happen. We sat around the table looking stupid until suddenly Arlene glanced out the viewport. “How cow! Fly, c’mere, you’re not going to believe this!”

I leaned over her shoulder, stared out the porthole, and gasped. The entire moon was splitting in two! A crack formed in the wall of the great central lunar chamber our ship was trapped in. It grew wider and wider, and soon I could see stars through the crack. In the space of fifteen minutes, the two hemispheres of PARI pushed apart from each other, connected by a thousand telescoping pylons. The connecting tubes snapped off like reeds in a storm. Of course, all this destruction and horrific shifting of forces happened in utter silence, since there was no atmosphere inside the hollow sphere.

The PARI moon base cracked in half like a planet-egg, the two pieces rushing away from each other at 107 kilometers per hour, according to the radar tracker. We waited impatiently—it would be at least two hours before they had separated far enough to risk a straight-line barrel-run with the ship, newly christened the Great Descent into Maelstrom by Blinky Abumaha … and the Solar Flare of Righteous Vengeance Against Enemies of People's State by Tokughavita. I planned to let the two of them duke it out for control of the history books.

I sat in the captain's chair—we had one, despite the weird individualistic streak of our communist apostles, not quite as iconoclastic as the Freds—with Ninepin on my lap, stroking his smoothness as I would a puppy's fur. He didn't object; he didn't take any notice until he was asked a question. I suppose I may as well have been petting a network terminal, but I had developed an affection for the talking bowling ball. Sure got me in trouble a lot, but then so did a puppy.

"My God," I said for about the millionth time. It was all I could think, watching the enormousness of the engineering. "I hope Sears and Roebuck know what they're missing."

"Oh, they're probably watching and pouting from their stateroom. Yeesh!" Arlene leaned over and asked Ninepin the question that I should have asked minutes before: "Who built this place? Was it human-Resuscitator symbiots?"

"Not symbiots," said Ninepin. "Human construction. Mission launched nine years before People's Glorious Revolution, construction begun in year 96

PGL, completed 142 PGL. Disrespect to Death-Bringing Deconstructionists assigned to PARI lunar base launched year 13 PGL."

"My God." This time it wasn't me; Arlene was the inadvertent petitioner. I was too busy wondering how many other far-flung human bases there were … and what terrifying aliens were following them home. "Wait," said Arlene, "that's too long____We're only 107 light-years from Earth. How come it took the Disrespect, ah, 137 years Earth-time to get here?" "Disrespect to Death-Bringing Deconstructionists stopped at following ports of call between Earth and this system, designated PM-220: planetary system designated—" "Skip it," she said. The names wouldn't mean anything to us anyway.

At last, although the moon continued to split apart, we had a clear enough path to the stars. I suggested that Blinky could probably pilot the ship out of lunar orbit, and he decided I wasn't an idiot and throttled up the engines. I wasn't sure I liked this system: I'm used to giving and getting orders, not having a philosophical discussion whenever we needed to move. But it had its advantages: every man and woman in the armed forces was capable of acting entirely autonomously—a whole military full of Fly Taggarts and Arlene Sanderses, no matter what silly political ideology they espoused!

There was no hurry. The ship would take many days to ramp up to speed, then an equivalent number to slow down. In between, we had five months of subjective travel time—five months! I thought about complaining, writing a strong letter to the manufacturer. But the weird fact of proxiluminous ("near lightspeed") travel was that notwithstanding our subjective travel time of five months, vice the seven weeks for the Res-men, both trips would take just about 107 years in Earth-time, with us lagging only about twenty-five minutes behind. If it weren't for our twenty-nine days of acceleration vice only six days for the Disrespect, we would arrive while they were still maneuvering into orbit.

But with that damned acceleration factor, the New-bies would have a three-week jump on us. I shuddered to think what they could do in twenty-three days to poor abused Earth, still reeling from the three-generation war with the Freds when Tokughavita and his crew left.

There was no hurry, but my heart was pounding, my pulse galloping a klick a minute. It was all I could do to sit in the command chair and act, like, totally nonchalant, like I did this sort of thing every day: jump in my proxiluminous-drive starship and pursue molecular-size aliens who wanted to infect all of Earth and "fix" us!

"Hey, Tofu," I said. He didn't notice or didn't catch the reference. "So when did the Resuscitators find you guys and infect you?"

Tokughavita looked pensive. "Do not know. Been trying to clarify. Were not symbiots when left People's Planet, sure of that."

"Don't you remember?"

"No memory. Remember actions, not when infected by Resuscitators—may not have noticed if turned off sensory inputs. Long before landed at PM-220, rebuilt engines en route, went over ship systems with hand of history."

The overcaptain didn't know, or the aliens had blocked it from his mind. They left Earth 137 years ago Earth-time, but they had visited many other planetary systems and bases before arriving at this one. The molecular Newbies could have infected the humans at any port of call along the way. Arlene and I discussed it in private. "So what did happen to them?" I asked. "They left Newbie-prime in a ship, attacked Fredworld—then what? What happened to their ship?"

She shrugged, making a nice effect with the front part of her uniform blouse. "Search me." (I wouldn't have minded.) "They must have headed here, but I don't know why or how … Jesus, Fly—maybe they didn't set out for Skinwalker; maybe they only ended up here later. Remember, it was forty years that the dead Newbie was on Fredworld.… Plenty of time for them to meet humans somewhere, change their course, and send out a general Newbie alert to tell all their buds where they were going." Arlene stood at the porthole, watching us drift slowly toward the crack. She spread her arms wide, stretching and almost touching the bulkhead on either side, so narrow was it.

We kicked the idea around a bit, but really there was no way to settle it. Some questions must remain forever unanswered.

I returned to the bridge when we approached the edge and forced myself to sit still and not bounce up and down like an orangutan in a banana factory. Blinky Abumaha piloted the ship about like I fly a plane: we didn't actually crash into anything, but it wasn't for lack of trying. By the time we finally found a big-enough hole that Blinky could make it through without scraping the sides—about seventy kilometers—my jaw ached from clenching it, and my lips were like rubber from the frozen half smile I had maintained. I was surprised my armrests didn't have finger marks on them. But we finally, by God, made it out of the PARI moon—intact.

Blinky slowly burned the engine up to 104 percent, the highest it was rated, and Sears and Roebuck entered in the relative coordinates, direction and distance, to Earth. We kicked the puppy into over-drive, and the huge boot of massive acceleration slammed us all back against the aft bulkheads. Suddenly, I wasn't sitting in my chair; I was lying back, like in a dentist's office…

I skip five months.

Oh, all right, I can't completely skip it. We spent the coasting time training in every tactic of the Light Drop that Arlene and I could remember, plus anything we missed that the Glorious People's Army had developed … some pretty hairy tactics involving scanning lasers and enemy eyeballs, life-stasis projectors, crap like that.

Sears and Roebuck had nothing to offer. Either the Klave had long ago given up actual physical fighting—which I doubted after hearing Arlene describe their performance among the Res-men—or else they just weren't very personally creative in the mayhem department. In any event, they sealed themselves into their stateroom again, and I didn't dare force it open for fear I'd find the walls papered with everything from nude pictures of Janice De'Souza to a Chatty Cathy doll. "Go to away!" they shouted in response to determined knocking.

"Skip it this time," Arlene suggested. "What do they have to offer anyway?"

So we did. It was all right. We humans were plenty ingenious enough for the entire Hyperrealist side. In five months, I was unable to instill a sense of cohesion among the apostles; they just didn't get it. They were the most mixed-up mob I'd ever seen in vaguely uniform uniforms. Somehow, they had a perfect fusion of utter individuality and total communalism: they assumed that naturally the State would provide everything that its citizens could need or want, but they refused to accept the concept of duty to others even in theory! It didn't wash. They kept yammering about something called a "post-economic society," which I figured meant they had so much of everything that material goods were literally worthless; even a beggar could pick discarded diamonds off the streets and dine on caviar every night. I have no idea what to call that system: Communist? Capitalist?

Heaven? It was a chilling thought: maybe the Charismatics were right, and the Rapture had come. Maybe when I got back, Jesus would be sitting there on His throne, wondering where we'd got to all these years.

This continued off and on every day for five long months … so I'm just going to skip it, if that's all right with everyone. Satisfied?

We followed our course to the sixth decimal place and decelerated to match velocities with Earth at about six hundred kilometers low orbit… and finally, the damned Klave appeared! They pushed into the bridge as if nothing had happened, slapping everyone on the back in congratulations and pouring around a seemingly endless bottle of some queer liqueur that tasted like head cheese. The rest of us were being dead serious—and here were Sears and Roebuck tripping happily through the low-g bridge, talking a klick a second! "Shut up, you idiots," I snapped. "Can't you see we're at general quarters here? Where are the damned Resuscitators?" Where indeed? Blinky and Tokughavita, along with a weapons sergeant named Morihatma Morirama Morirama, had figured out how to work the particle beam cannons, which basically were human versions of the Fred ray. They sat, one in each cockpit, waiting tensely for first sight of the Resuscitator ship, the Disrespect to Death-Bringing Deconstructionists. They waited a long time. Arlene and I sweated a liter each standing in the control room with the artificial gravity set to 0.3 g, 0.1 g in the crawlways: just enough to avoid total vertigo, but still allow for rapid movement across the ship using

our special low-grav combat tactics. We waited a long time, too. After seventeen orbits, radiation detection sweeps of the stratosphere, infrared examination, every damned thing we could think of, we faced the stunning truth.

There was no Res-man ship, not in orbit, not on the surface. The Disrespect had not made it yet. We were alone orbiting Earth … and there wasn't a trace of our spacefaring technological civilization. We were home, but nobody had bothered leaving the lights on.

20

We broke into the outer layers of atmosphere. The Great Descent into Maelstrom of Solar Flare of Righteous Vengeance Against Enemies of People's State—my impossibly ugly compromise between Blinky and Tokughavita—nicknamed the Great Vengeance, to make it at least pronounceable, was a damned good ship. We flew lower and lower, stabilizing fins and the hypersonic air-cushion keeping the ride so steady that it almost seemed like a simulator. We skimmed quickly over Asia Minor and Western Europe, crossed England, and brushed the Arctic en route to Newfoundland. Blinky curved our orbit, blowing fuel like he didn't care. "Can fill damn quick from ocean—good jolly job!"

Arlene grinned, but I didn't really like his attitude.

Sears and Roebuck were behaving even stranger. They planted themselves at the perfect viewing port and hogged it utterly, staring down at the planet surface with a longing that I just couldn't understand. It wasn't even their planet! They didn't respond to queries, and we basically just forgot about them while we studied the remains of the Earth.

Still no response from below. There were many cities left, and as we got lower, they didn't look particularly devastated by war. But everywhere we saw nature encroaching on human habitation … like all those creepy movies where the magnificent Indian city with spires and domes is overrun by the jungle—vines and creepers and baboons invading in the Raj's palace.

Nobody contacted us; no ships flew up to assess us. There was no fire-control radar sweeping the Great Vengeance, not even any ground response. The Earth slumbered like a doped-up giant.

So where the hell were we supposed to go? Arlene had her own agenda. "Ninepin," she said, "who was actually with, ah, Gallatin Albert when he died?"

“Lovelace Jill only companion when died in year 31 PGL.”

Arlene frowned. “Didn’t anybody else see the body?”

“Body exhibited in Hall of People’s Heroes 31 PGL to 44 PGL. Body interred beneath rebuilt Tabernacle of People’s Faith of Latter-Day Saints, Salt Lake Grad.”

Arlene gasped. I don’t know why—was she still harboring hope that she would find Albert alive and well?

“A.S.,” I said, “I think you should accept what is. He loved you, but he’s dead. Christ, girl, it’s been something like five hundred years!”

She didn’t look up. “And he was working on life stasis when he died.”

“But there wasn’t even a prototype until seven years after he died. Get ahold of yourself, Lance. Let’s get a little reality check going here.” I walked to the video screen that showed the for’ard view. “Don’t you think if Albert were still around that Earth would have more civilization left than that?” We were currently skimming low over the Big Muddy, north up the Mississippi River at midnight. There were settlements and even lights, but no evidence of high civilization other than electricity.

Tokughavita came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder. I jumped. It was the first friendly contact from the amazingly solitary humans of the twenty-first century. I guess he had been watching me and Arlene—we had always tended to touch a lot, just as friends. “World is gone,” he said, voice heavy with emotion withheld. “Where are Resuscitators? Expected they at least would be here.”

I smiled grimly. “Maybe Fly and Arlene killed ‘em.”

“Maybe they got bored and evolved again,” said my counterpart from across the cabin. “Maybe they evolved into something completely different and forgot all about us.”

“Who knows?”

Tokughavita didn’t seem satisfied with our left-hand, right-hand explanations, but it was the best we could give him. We would never know why the Newbies never arrived—but thank God they didn’t. The Northeast Corridor was in the same condition as the Mississippi Delta: houses, buildings, roads intact, the power grid still working, but no evidence of anything but habitation. “I want to go to Salt Lake City,” Arlene declared. I snorted in exasperation, but, hell, I didn’t have any better suggestion. We turned west.

“Toku, what was life like when you left?” I asked. He seemed at a loss for words. “People taken control of State from greedy-capitalists, run for good of all.”

He said greedy capitalists as if it were a hyphenated word, a linked concept. “You what—nationalized the industries?”

“Industry run for good of all. But so efficient, paradise continued.”

“For the workers?”

He looked puzzled. “No workers. Work old concept, not modern. Workers abolished before People’s Glorious Revolution.”

Now I was the confused one. “Wait a minute—then who ran the industries?”

Toku looked back at Blinky Abumaha for help. “Good damn system,” Blinky added. “Automated, workers not necessary, just get in the way—jolly good!”

Arlene started to get interested, since the conversation was taking a notably academic tinge. “So wait … if there were no workers, then who was being exploited by the greedy capitalists?”

This stymied both Blinky and Tokughavita. “Never thought damn-all about exploitation. Machines, artificial intelligence … can greedy-capitalists exploit electronics?”

I turned away. The conversation had veered way over my head. Arlene continued, but I ignored them all. I don't deal well with academics, as you've probably figured out by now.

We were fast approaching Salt Lake City—or Salt Lake Grad, I remembered Ninepin calling it. It must have been winter in the northern hemisphere; we kicked through an overcast sky, and suddenly the rebuilt Cathedral loomed before us. "Jesus freaking Christ!" I yelped, freezing the economics lesson behind me. Arlene and everyone else rushed to the video, then to the actual viewports, evidently not believing the image on the screen.

The new Cathedral of the People's Faith of Latter-Day Saints rose about six hundred stories into the Utah sky, a veritable Tower of Babel! It had a ball at the very top. An observation deck? A radar system? "Jeez, Fly, it looks like a huge fist of triumph raised over the Earth."

"Built after Freds repelled," Tokughavita confirmed. "Celebrates victory."

Suddenly, every warning light on the bridge went off at once. The place lit up like a Christmas tree, and about six different kinds of sirens sounded. "Mises!" Blinky swore at the con. He jerked on the stick, and the whole freaking ship swerved violently to the left and up, flinging us all to the deck. I was pressed hard, nine g's at least! Then the acceleration let up. 1 painfully picked myself off the deck, shaking like a pine needle in a strong wind. "What the hell was that about?"

"Force field," said our pilot, face pale. "Damn jolly strong. Almost killed—crash, crash!"

We circled Salt Lake Grad for more than forty minutes, mapping the exact extent of the field. One of the crew was a mathematician, a girl named Suzudira Nehsuzuki; she calculated the highest probability that the center of the field was at the Tabernacle. My guess was that it all emanated from the bulb at the top of the structure, more than a kilometer above ground level.

"Fly," said my lance. "I can't tell you why … but I must get inside that Tabernacle."

“Criminey, don’t you think I know why? Albert’s buried there, he spent the last years of his life there. Why shouldn’t you want to see it?”

“Fly—I want to contact it.”

“Contact what?”

“The Tabernacle!”

“Arlene, do you feel all right? It’s a building, for Christ’s sake!”

She turned to stare at me; her eyes were filled with the intelligence of fanaticism. I took a step back; I’d never seen her like that! “Fly… what was Albert working on just before he died?”

“Um, life stasis.”

“What else did he work on?”

“What else? I don’t remember anything else.” “Worked on SneakerNet,” Tokughavita said from behind me. I jumped, then was annoyed at being startled. I sat on a chair at the radio station and stared at the video monitor as we endlessly circled the looming Tabernacle.

“He worked on artificial intelligence! Fly, I’ll bet that building has some sort of net, and it’s probably intelligent, and it’s probably been sitting here for five hundred years waiting for me to get back!” Jesus, talk about your megalomania! Then again, wasn’t that precisely why Albert spent the last years of his life desperately trying to extend his life, so he could see Arlene Sanders again when she returned? “Go ahead,” I ordered, rising from the chair and offering it to her. “Talk your brains out.” Arlene sat down and stared at the controls. “I don’t know how to turn it on,” she admitted. Tokughavita reached over her shoulder and flipped the switch. I noticed that when he did, he snuck a glance down her cleavage. Somehow, that made me feel better. No matter what weirdo hybrid of communism and capitalism they had developed, they were still, by God, human beings.

“What frequency does this broadcast on?” I asked.

“All,” Tokughavita said.

“All right, which frequencies, plural?” “All,” he repeated. I finally got the message that he had set it to transmit on all possible frequencies … though I couldn’t understand how that was possible. “Arlene to Tabernacle,” she said. “Arlene calling Tabernacle. Come in, Tabernacle.”

A voice responded instantly. “Tabernacle here … but how do I know you’re really Arlene?” It sounded so damned familiar that for a moment I didn’t even recognize it. Then our video monitor went to snow, and a moment later, a face appeared. It was a face I knew very, very well—it was her face.

“Jill!” I screamed.

“Hello, person who looks like Fly Taggart,” Jill said. “I’m not really Jill—I’m an AI program that Jill Lovelace set up. Who are you? And who are those pair of gorillas you brought with you?”

I glanced behind, honestly confused who she meant. So that’s how familiarity breeds contentment! Or does it breed? “Jill, meet Sears and Roebuck—don’t ask which is which, they won’t understand you.” The Magilla Gorillas simply nodded gravely, impatient for the ground.

Her little blond girl’s face simpered a bit, as kids do when you introduce them to a new relative and they’re trying to be polite and grown up, but in reality they haven’t a clue why they should care who the new person is. “They’re a Klave pair—” “Man! Really? Cool!” It took me a moment to realize she was being slightly sarcastic. “Love your store, guys. Now, if you don’t mind, who the heck are you two, too?”

“What the hell do you mean, who are we?” Arlene demanded. “We’re Sergeant Fly Taggart and Lance Corporal Arlene Sanders, United States Marine Corps!”

“Prove it.”

Arlene and I looked at each other. “How can we freaking prove we’re really Fly and Arlene?” I asked. Jill’s image smiled. “What’s the password?” I sat

down again next to Arlene. A smaller television monitor at the console in front of us showed the same image as the for'ard video screen. "Jill," I said patiently, "we didn't set up any password with you." "But you know it anyways, dudes."

"We do?"

"It's something you said to me … something only you two would remember." Jill's face wasn't the aged grandmother she must have been when she died; instead, it was the Jill we knew from before—just a year or so ago, from our point of view. Still, I became so terribly homesick, looking at that fifteen-year-old's face; she was like a little sister or something—a bratty little sister, but still the closest thing to family I had left, besides Arlene. Everyone else I had ever known on Earth was long since dust in the dust. "When did I say it?"

"You said it the first time you really trusted me. You made me feel totally adult, like a woman. The President of the Council of Twelve always, you know, made me feel like a little girl… He was totally the Bomb, I'm not dissing him! But he always thought of me as a kid."

I closed my eyes, straining to remember. Her first test by fire came when we took the truck with the teleport pad inside. Something appeared—what was it? "Arlene, remember back on Earth, with Jill and Albert, when we hijacked that truck? What was the monster that teleported into it?"

"Urn … Jeez, that goes back a ways. Wait—I've got it. It was a boney. We killed it, but it shot its rockets and just missed you, Jill, honey." The Jill image shuddered. "Yeah, I remember that! And you're right.… That's when you said the password to me. Remember, Mr. Fly? Remember what you told me after the rockets went on either side of me?"

Damn it all to hell—I didn't remember! I remembered saying something … but what was it? I shook my head sadly.

"Look," Jill said, "let me cheer you up with a little game. You ever play Charades?" I nodded dumbly, and she continued. "I'll start: you watch and guess the phrase I'm thinking of."

The camera pulled back—or the animated image shrank—and we saw a full-body shot of Jill. She held up four fingers. I wasn't sure what to do, but Arlene said, "Four words." Then Jill held up one finger, then one again. "First word … one syllable." Jill frowned like an angry mother and pointed savagely to the side. "Point," I guessed. "Look, look out!"

"Leave, get out of here," Arlene suggested. Jill kept pointing. "Leave, go away, go—" Jill smiled and pointed at us with both hands. "First word is Go?" I asked. Jill nodded emphatically. She held up two fingers, then one touching her elbow. "Second word, one syllable." I was starting to get the hang of the game. Then Jill really threw me for a loop: she slapped her waist, pantomiming drawing a pistol and shooting someone.

"Shoot!" Arlene shouted. "Draw, fire, stick 'em up!"

"Pow, bang—ah—gun, bullet, gunfighter.…" Jill touched her ear. "Sounds like," Arlene muttered. Then Jill stuck her thumbs into the shoulder holes of her sleeveless shirt. "Shirt?" I guessed, and Jill rolled her eyes.

She touched her ear again, then closed her eyes and smiled blissfully. "Sounds like nap?" Arlene asked.

"Sap, map, crap—"

"Sounds like sleep! Weep, heap, teep …" "Teep?" demanded my lance. "What the hell is a teep?"

"It's where indies sleep," I griped.

Jill was getting frantic. She finally pointed at her ear, waited a beat, then pointed at herself. Arlene muttered, "Sounds like … pest?"

Jill almost yelped with satisfaction, but she kept her mouth shut, just pointing at Arlene. "Pest?" asked my lance. "Go pest? Go pester? Go best?"

Suddenly I jumped to my feet—I remembered! Dramatically, I stabbed a meaty forefinger at our long-dead companion. "Go west, young lady!" I hollered.

The image of Jill moved into extreme close-up on her mouth. “You have spoken the password. You now have infinite power! You may pass, Sahib.” Blinky’s voice from the back was an anticlimax.

“Ah, force field down. Good damn show, that.” “On to the Tabernacle,” I suggested. “Put her down on that bulby thing, if there’s enough room—that is, if you don’t mind, Blinky.” I really hated this new-jack command and control system.

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Blinky Abumaha continued to circle the Tabernacle, fearsomely eyeing the bulbous tip. “Ah,” he said, “ah, not sure is—not sure sir is too damn good idea, on the top.”

Arlene and I exchanged a glance back and forth, then we both turned the withering glare on Abumaha. “Can I, Fly?” she asked. I gallantly gestured her forward. “Blinky, don’t take this the wrong way, honey, but—to quote Major Kong in Dr. Strangelove, ‘I’ve been to a world’s fair, a picnic, and a rodeo, and that’s the stupidest damn thing I ever heard!’” The pilot looked simultaneously relieved and chagrined. “Not serious? Just jolly joke? Oh, terrible fun—ho, ho!” He sounded genuine in the laughter, but seemingly unsure what he was laughing at. “Just put us down a quarter klick away,” I clarified.

“We’ll, um, walk the rest of the way.”

We landed with much ceremony, a celebration that continued well past the first moment Arlene and I and Sears and Roebuck could squirm free. The Klave, having already had their celebration when we made orbit, disdained the party. Thank God. I didn’t think I could take any more of that head-cheese liqueur! Finally, we wriggled off and marched resolutely toward the Tabernacle: Arlene in the lead, pulling us forward like an anxious puppy on a leash; Sears and Roebuck at the tail, looking worlds-weary; and poor Fly Taggart, Lieutenant Fly Taggart, stuck in the middle like the wishbone. From this short distance, less than 250 meters, the building utterly dominated one whole quarter of the sky, looming up so high we couldn’t see the top for the weather—gray, ominous, overcast.

Suddenly, before progressing more than fifty strides from the ship, Sears and Roebuck stopped. “Will we be okay,” they said anxiously.

“Yes, we’re fine,” I reassured them.

“No, no, not to ask! Will we be okay, is calling on the telephone our uncles.”

“Huh?” I scratched my head. They were making even less sense than usual.

Arlene, savagely impatient with her goal in sight, broke into the conversation. “Oh, wake up, Fly! I mean, sir. They’re saying they don’t want to go any farther; they want to call their uncles, probably on the lunar base, to come pick them up and take them home.”

My jaw dropped. “S and R, is that what you’re saying?”

“In ungood typical English of Arlene Sanders is a yes,” they said.

“Sears—Roebuck—are you aware of the fact that it has been about five hundred years since you left the Klave base?”

They grabbed each other’s head and pumped vigorously—frustration at my little-child inability to grasp the obvious. “Yes, yes! Is impatience why uncles wait with much foot-tapping for Sears and Roebuck’s return!”

I shrugged. I know when I’m beat. “So long, boys, can’t say it’s always been a treat, but it’s been real.” Even Arlene turned her attention away from her true love’s final resting place to smile in farewell. “Don’t take any wooden Fredpills,” she said, thoroughly confusing the Klave.

“Has been it a slice,” said the pair of Magilla Gorillas. Without another word, they turned left and strode off, marching in unison, subvocalizing all the way to each other. They disappeared around a tall ancient-looking column that supported a statue of what looked like Brigham Young, and we never saw Sears and Roebuck again.

We didn’t speak, Arlene and I, the rest of the way to the Tabernacle. There wasn’t much to say. She knew what she hoped to find; I knew she was fooling herself. The building had a gigantic ceremonial door—and by “gigantic,” I don’t mean just huge! Just the door alone was bigger than the entire Tabernacle itself had been, before the Fred nuke. But when we touched it, it swung open swiftly and silently, and musical chimes played us

in, sounding like a chorus of angels after our ordeal. I think they played some vocal work by Handel, but I didn't recognize it.

The interior of the Tabernacle was hollow. I don't think you quite got that; the building was more than a kilometer high, and hollow. I felt like we were in the center of a volcanic crater! Inside was a huge city, with many temples and churches and such … and in the very center, on a hillock, was an exact duplicate of the original Mormon Tabernacle—probably stone for stone, if it had religious significance. Arlene pointed at the recreation. "There," she said, deducing the obvious.

We took twenty minutes to cross to the smaller Tabernacle within. Above us, the ceiling of the outer Tabernacle sparkled with jewels that must be worth nothing these days but the intrinsic value of their loveliness; in five hundred years, I would hope we at least would have learned how to manufacture perfect gemstones!

But it was a lovely sight. The People's Faith of Latter-Day Saints didn't use just diamonds; they painted gigantic scenes in color using every imaginable stone, from rubies to emeralds to blue sapphires to garnets and, yes, diamonds. It was no longer ostentatious, since anyone could do it—even the beggar in the street—but it was still stunning in its simple beauty.

Taking a last look up at a scene of angels showing the Church Fathers' Salt Lake City (before it was Salt Lake Grad), I followed Arlene into the inner Tabernacle. So far as I could tell, she hadn't even looked up at the ceiling.

Inside, the place looked exactly like the original: exactly. I didn't check, but I'm sure if you made a nineteenth-century stereovision with one picture of the old and the other of the new, they would matte over each other perfectly as one image, but with one difference: the hollow interior of the tribute-Tabernacle was completely empty, except for the magnificent organ—and I'd bet the latter worked perfectly, too.

We walked slowly across the floor, our melancholy footsteps echoing back at us. Arlene bowed her head; I don't think she was praying… She must have been overwhelmed by the nearness of her love's life—and death. I

almost put my hand on her shoulder, but I wasn't the guy she wanted just then.

Ahead of us was a dark circle. As we got closer, I realized it was a circular hole in the floor. A hole? When we got to within ten meters, a grinding noise began. By the time we reached it, I realized it was a platform elevator… and there was a lone figure standing on it, rising out of the dark depths, waiting for us.

Arlene halted in astonishment. "Jill!" I shouted, rushing forward.

"Whoa, whoa!" Jill said, putting her hands out in a stop motion. "Don't get your skivvies in a knot, dudes! I'm not really me—I mean, I'm not really here. This is just a 3-D projection, and if you try to hug me, you'll fly right through me and mess up your knee … Fly."

She looked exactly as she had when we left her, a year and five centuries ago. She was a little taller, maybe, but her hair was still blond, still punky. She had the same half smile and knowing eyes, still no makeup (thank God), and now she wore a bitchin' black leather jacket, lycra gym shorts that hugged her butt and upper thighs, and transparent plastic combat boots. I stood and stared, and blow me down if you couldn't have bet me two months' pay that that was the real Jill, and I'd have taken you up on it. "Jiminy!" she suddenly yelped, staring at us. "You really are Fly and Arlene!"

"We told you!" snapped the latter-named. "But I didn't believe you, even after you passed, you know, the test thing. Now that you're in here, I just did a genetic sample thing, and like you're really you!"

The animated image of Jill—just an artificial intelligence program, according to itself—dropped its jaw just like the real Jill would do. She leaned over and planted both hands on her knees to view us from a slightly different angle. "God, how did you live for four hundred and eighty-three years? Oh—relativity! Right?"

Arlene nodded, sniffed, then wiped her nose on her military sleeve. "Jill, I… look, I don't want to seem ungrateful, in case you have any surprises,

but—" The fifteen-year-old stood tall and folded her arms, taking on that slightly superior look that age is prone to. "Don't worry, Arlene … I'm not going to throw an animated Albert at you. I know you wouldn't appreciate it. But I am here to take you downstairs, where there's a present for you." She waited a beat, then when we didn't move, she impatiently urged us forward with her hands.

We joined her on the platform, which immediately began to sink. I didn't ask her any questions; I didn't know what to ask. I decided it could all wait… I was pretty sure we could always come back later and catch up on what she did with her life—and get autographed copies of the books she wrote! If she didn't save a pair for us, I'd kill her, except she was already long dead and buried, or whatever they did nowadays.

It was a creepy thought, and I stole many a glance at "Jill," trying not to think that Jill was dead. I felt a big lumpy knot in my stomach, even though I had known all along this would be the punishment for hopping around the universe at proxiluminous speeds. Damn it! I did what I had to do—we both did! Why, in the name of God Almighty, do we have to pay such a terrible price? Everyone we ever knew or loved, besides ourselves, Arlene and I, was dead and gone, long gone!

We descended for about six minutes. The shaft was totally black … but at last, we saw a blue glowing door. But we went right past it without stopping! "First-floor dungeon," Jill announced out of the blue. "Whips and tortures. Racks, pressings, iron cages, and bats." She stood in a perfect at-ease posture: feet shoulder-width apart, chest and shoulders squared away, hands clasped behind her back.

Another long interval passed, during which we continued to descend. I put my hand out and felt the walls around the shaft sliding against my fingers. We were moving slowly, not like we were in an elevator in a high-rise, but at a stately pace … as befitted a holy place.

Another door hove into view, red this time. "Second-floor dungeon," Jill recorded. "Iron maidens, thumbscrews, rat cages … ladies' underwear." Arlene snorted, trying hard to look stern and not smile … This was a holy place, after all! The third floor took the longest. I swear, we rode for twelve

minutes in silence, but maybe it was shorter. At last, a simple wooden door rolled up into view—and at last, we stopped. The door opened, showing us a nice comfortable hallway. “Third-floor dungeon,” Jill impressively tolled, “ev—ery—bod—y out!” Arlene and I stepped through, and I paused, waiting for Jill to join us. She shook her head sadly. “Sorry, Corporal—I mean, Sergeant—” “Lieutenant,” corrected my ever-so-helpful help-meet, Arlene.

“Really? Cool! Sorry, Lieutenant, and, um, Lance Corporal… all ghosts must stay aboard the elevator. It’s like a rule.”

Smiling sadly, Jill faded away slowly … starting at her feet and working her way upward, until at last only the smile remained, then even that vanished. Arlene sighed. “I always did love that book,” she said—another one of her patented, semantic-free comments.

The hallway stretched both directions, but right in front of us, where we couldn’t possibly miss it, was a chalk scrawl. J.L., it read, and there was an arrow pointing left. “Jill Lovelace,” A.S. and I said simultaneously. We followed the arrow.

There were about a hundred twists and turns, doors to pass through. It was a labyrinth there, on the third-floor “dungeon” below the Tabernacle! Mostly offices, but a few looked like labs—a far cry from the tanks and artillery pieces below the original Tabernacle, but then, these were happier, more peaceful times. We’d have been utterly lost without the chalk initials and arrows—and I appreciated the reference to our first mission: that was how I eventually realized Arlene was still alive and how I found her.

At last, we were led to the door of a huge lab. Through the clear window in the door, I saw a room as vast as the inner Tabernacle above us, but stuffed full of laboratory equipment. As we approached, a motion detector felt us coming and opened a panel in front of a palm-size touchplate.

Arlene and I stopped abruptly, looking back and forth to each other. I was quite disturbed to see the wild light of hope in her eyes. “Look, don’t get your hopes up into orbit, A.S. You know you’re not going to find Albert, so don’t even think it! I don’t want you collapsing later, when you finally

realize the truth." She just looked at me, and I don't think her expression changed a millimeter. "You going to touch it—or should I?" she asked.

I inclined my head. I was sure Jill would have programmed both our palm prints into the doorlock, since both were on file in the old FBI database. Arlene reached her hand out, hesitated a moment, then placed her palm against the plate. I heard a loud click, and the door rolled down into the floor so quickly that I almost didn't see it moving.

We entered the huge lab, and the door slid up and locked behind us. We were probably trapped until Jill's AI program decided to let us leave. We strolled around a bit, taking in the sight: tables, tables, tables, full of elaborate machinery and strange swirls of tubing; rows of tiny devices that looked suspiciously like computers linked together into a neural network; huge tubes big enough for humans, full of humans, I should add, doubtless in some sort of life stasis; and glassware everywhere … test tubes, beakers, flasks, you name it—but nobody walking around tending things. It was entirely automated.

And in the center of it all was a huge sarcophagus, like the things they buried Egyptian mummies in. We approached, and Arlene suddenly reached out and grabbed my hand, squeezing so hard she almost cracked my bones! I knew exactly who she expected to find, and exactly who she wouldn't find in the case. Sadly, I was right. We got closer, and it was obvious that whoever was in there, it wasn't Albert… who was, after all, about my size. The sarcophagus was much too small.

But neither of us was prepared for what we did find: the case contained the fifteen-year-old body of Jill! She looked like she was just sleeping, nude and serene, but I couldn't see her breasts rise and fall, as I would have expected if she were breathing.

Arlene leaned over the case while I was still staring, trying to avoid looking at parts I wasn't supposed to look at. "Jesus, Fly!" said my bud. "It's a clone!" "A … clone? How do you know?"

Arlene reached over and picked up a nameplate, handing it to me:

Sleeping Cloney—

A prick on the finger shall make her sleep

A hundred years in dreams so deep,

Until she wakes in love and bliss,

Restored to life by a princely kiss.

We stared at Jill, Arlene and I. “Do you think it’s the real Jill?” I asked.

Arlene shook her head. “That’s not how Jill would do it. She’d want to live her life and die normally, or at least preserve herself as an adult. No, I’ll bet you this is a clone, grown to the age she was when we left, her brain filled only with the memories a fifteen-year-old would have.”

“Does she remember us?”

“Why not? Jill isn’t cruel. She wouldn’t put that torture on us, Fly … to know the new Jill, but not be known, to see her as sullen and withdrawn as she was before, after the monsters killed her parents.” Arlene reached out and gently touched the glass cover of the sarcophagus. “Hang tight, honey, we’ll come back, as soon as we’ve seen the present you left us.” “Maybe that’s it,” I said, nodding at Jill. But Arlene shook her head impatiently. “Come on, Fly! She’s a pest, but she’s certainly not that egotistical!”

A booklet sat on the case, and I took it down and skimmed it. Then I stopped and said, “Holy cow! You know what this is, A.S.?”

I handed it to her. The title was: The Deconstructionists’ New Clothes, Being the Oh-so-secret History of the Galaxy’s Most Stupidest War. The author was Jill Lovelace, PhD, LLD, CIA, MAD.

It was a short story, but we both realized what it really was. Somehow, Jill had managed to pry out of someone, maybe the Klave—Scars and Roebuck’s uncles?—the whole freaking mystery that we never could get… what the damned war was all about! Yeah, right, the Six Million Year War that resulted, eventually, in a strategic chess move by the Freds, of House

Deconstructionists, to invade Earth and kill us by the millions. The war that had started the whole thing.

I'm not going to quote the whole story. It was long and pretty damned good, and I don't want Jill's electrifying prose to make my own look lamer than it already does. So I'll paraphrase the intel instead. Of all the secrets Arlene and I had faced since we first found ourselves under attack by space demons, that was the most frustrating, the most galling … or to Arlene, the outright funniest: that a war could erupt and be prosecuted for six million years between two competing schools of literary criticism! But at last we got the full, complete story of how it happened. According to Jill's book, the same "First Men" who built the Gates and the gravity zones and scattered them throughout the galaxy left behind only one other legacy—eleven fragments of prose.

That's it, the sum total remains of a race that was technologically sophisticated and advanced at least three billion years ago: Gates, gravity zones, and eleven pieces of literature. All the races of the galaxy in roughly our own time (six or seven million years ago, which on the three-billion-year scale is negligible) began to analyze these fragments—each used its own most highly refined theories of literary criticism, but because literary criticism is at its core nothing much but a projected map of whatever weird cobwebs infest the mind of the critic, naturally each race painted a different picture of what the First Men were really like.

Eventually, the war of words turned ugly, and important literary critics became casualties—not that anyone cared much. But when one coalition, the Deconstructionists, decided to end the argument by deconstructing the Klave homeworld—and they failed!—the Great Divide became law and eventually custom, which is a billion times stronger than law. For six million years, give or take a month, the Deconstructionists and the Hyperrealists had been duking it out for control of the literary forms of the galaxy … and for the right to reconstruct the past. And that was it! As Arlene said when she finished reading, quoting some sci-fi book she loved, Nineteen Eighty-Four:

Who controls the past controls the present; who controls the present controls the future. So ever since just around the time the first proto-

humanoids were climbing down out of the trees on Earth and looking up at the great white light in the night sky, wondering if it were a divine eyeball, these ginks have been murdering each other over half the galaxy over some artsy-fartsy, lit-crit interpretation of eleven story fragments. Then, when they got tired of fighting in their own backyard, the bloody-handed Deconstructionists decided to take their college literature thesis to our lovely planet! God, this universe is an absolute treasure. I love every centimeter of it—no, really.

I put the book back down, resisting the impulse to fling it across the room. To hell with them all, Hyperrealist and Deconstructionist alike! I didn't give a damn about the stupid fragments—I had more important fish to smoke.

We hunted around for a few minutes, and suddenly Arlene let out a glad cry. Another arrow! J.L., it read, and pointed at a small room.

The room had a regular door, with a good, old-fashioned handle. I turned it and opened her up. The room was bare, save for a single card table, dust free. On the table was a small black box with a single orange light showing unwinking on the side. We crossed the space together, my lance and I, and together we saw the single sign left on the box. It was hand-lettered, and I recognized Jill's atrocious handwriting. There was a single word: Albert. We stared. Arlene fell to the ground on her butt, but she didn't take her eyes off the black box with the bright glowing eye.

Albert!

Albert?

I didn't know what to say, so, Goddamn it, I decided to just shut up and be a Marine. Semper fi, Mac … I know when I'm beat!

22

It was Arlene who found the Door, but Slink Slunk was more excited than the rest of us, for she recognized what it was. All of the rest of our apostles —Whack, Sniff, Chomp, and Swaller, our spineys, and Pfc. Wilhelm Dodd, the zombie—had been created within the simulation by the normal "monster-spawn" process that mimicked the vats and genetic programming the Freds used to create the original monsters.

But Slink was the prototype spiney; she was the "firssst and only," as she put it, generated specially by the Newbies inside their program environment, before the rest of the simulation was even running. And Slink remembered her existence before the rest of the simulation was built. The Newbies were better artists than they realized: they hadn't intended to give freaking free will to their program demons, and they sure as hell didn't want the code to remember its own creation!

We had searched the immediate vicinity of the star-shaped chamber after ducking out Arlene's crack, but we didn't find anywhere else to go but the huge Gate. "It's me," she said, crestfallen. "I still remember the last time, and I searched for almost a whole day before giving up and heading through the Gate." The ground was jagged with sharp broken pieces of dead plant life, and the stench of sulphur almost knocked me out. The spineys seemed to love it, though, and even Dodd looked a little less tormented. The sky overhead was inverted, white with black stars; I tried not to look at it, since it gave me vertigo like I'd never felt before, not even in zero-g. "Fly," said my partner. "I'm trying to remember how Olestradamus managed to escape his doom at the claws of the hell princes. He survived, didn't he? He's out here somewhere, waiting for us?"

I tried to "remember" it that way with her, but Olestradamus's death was too vivid. In the end, we both had to give it up—the poor pumpkin would have to remain our first martyr.

Damn it! I thought. What's the use of lucid dreaming if you can't actually control everything? I didn't have a good answer, so I pointed wordlessly at the Gate.

Holding hands, we shot through, then we fairly flew through the Deimos base, avoiding traps we remembered, converting a few more monsters, and killing what we couldn't convert. We picked up a Clyde—despite my objections that I didn't remember the genetically engineered human with the machine gun until we got back to Earth—three more spineys, and a passel of zombie buddies for Dodd. We even managed to convert a fatty, but the planet-shaped critter with the fireball shooters where its hands should have been, Fats Jacko, he called himself, was so overweight that he just couldn't keep up. In the end, I dubbed him our first missionary and sent him off at his own pace to convert the rest of monsterland. But before we got to the nasty spidermind at the bottom of Deimos, Arlene finally managed to find the Door.

She first started looking for the Door when she remembered the three courses in program design that she took during her brief stint in college. "Fly," she whispered, while we crouched in the hand-shaped gully where Arlene had killed the Dodd-zombie the last time. "Whenever we wrote a program, we always used to stick in what we called back doors. Maybe the Newbies did, too!"

"What the hell is a back door?"

She licked her lips, sighting along her .45 rifle at a lumbering pinkie. So far, it hadn't smelled us. We weren't worried about it hearing us; they made so much noise just walking and breathing that they probably wouldn't hear a freight train coming up behind them on the railroad tracks. But there were other creatures out there with acute hearing—silence was best.

"When you want to test some aspect of a program, you create routines to set the various variables to, well, anything you like."

"Ah, setting variables. More college stuff. How's this supposed to help us, Lance?" College was insidious. You started out just to learn a thing or two, then suddenly—wham, bam—you're wearing lieutenant's butter-bars on

your collar! No thanks. I would never become an officer—and I would never go to college. “You need a combination,” Arlene answered. “A password to access these procedures, but if you have it, you can move around the software like a ghost in a haunted house, passing right through walls and doors like they weren’t even there.”

I stared at a rough rock wall to our left. “You mean, if we found this back door, we could phase right through that stone wall?”

“Fly, if we found this back door, we might be able to get out of the whole simulation and get loose in the Disrespect’s operating system.

I stared at her, feeling real hope for the first time in days—simulated days. “Jesus, Arlene! Maybe I should have gone to university!” We both stared at each other, shocked by the words that came out of my mouth. “Ah, that is just a joke,” I explained. “All right… I’m remembering now.” She stared at a particularly juicy rock. She grunted with the strain of “remembering” a Door. She sweated, but nothing happened to the rock. “Christ, I can’t just visualize it from nothing!”

Too loud: a horde of imps heard and came over to investigate. We shot them from cover while they threw their mucus wads at us. I took a shot in the face and was blinded again—criminey! Arlene backed away, pumping shot after shot from the lever-action rifle she had picked up in a storage locker in the inverted-cross chamber on Deimos. It was easier for her to remember the most recent weapon she actually remembered using; I tried for a double-barreled shotgun, but I was still stuck with the damned Sig-Cow. The spineys moved close enough that our own spiney corps could open fire from the sides with their piles of sharp rocks. The imps didn’t know what to think! They hurled their snotballs for a while until they realized their attackers were other imps, immune to the fire, then the enemy broke and ran. Arlene cleaned me up with a medical kit, also salvaged from the locker where she had found the rifle—same place we found uniforms (but no armor) to cover our nakedness right after the jump. Dodd was perfectly content to wander around starkers, once we got him a shotgun, but a red-faced Arlene ordered him to cover himself up. Evidently, the sight of her naked ex-lover, the one she had killed once, brought back too many horrific memories. Bad memories could be savage enemies in this place.

I was thinking about the Door, or lack of a Door. “I think just visualizing isn’t enough. You have to have it really strong in your mind.”

“I did!”

“No, I mean like obsessing about it. You have to anticipate, salivate for it, visualize it some distance ahead of you and hold the thought in your mind as your life’s goal all the way down there.” She sat down beside me and put her arm over my shoulders, holding me like a frightened lover. “It’s a pretty horrible thought, Flynn Taggart. Means we have to go deeper, doesn’t it?”

“’Fraid so, A.S.”

Arlene nodded slowly. “Well, that’s why they let us wear the Bird and Anchor. Okay, Fly, it’s all starting to come back to me, now. I remember where the Door is.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s three levels down. Remember that head-twisting open courtyard with all the freaking teleporters that zapped us to all the different rooms? Well, it’s—it’s in the room at the back of the courtyard with all the crushing pistons.”

I struggled to remember. In the intervening months (and thousands of monsters), it had all become a blur. But I thought I remembered what she was talking about. “Good deal, kiddo, just keep visualizing it. When we get there, we’ll see it—I guarantee.” I hoped I wouldn’t have to eat those words, but the only thing that might do the trick now was total assurance on my part. Maybe it would be infectious. Three levels down, we entered the courtyard. I decided we had better clear the central buildings first, which contained pumpkins, some spineys, and a hell prince—too much firepower to leave at our backs. With so many of us, virtually an army, we could use real tactics. Arlene volunteered to take point, which in this case meant she got to jump from teleporter to teleporter, until she found the one that dropped her in the center of the courtyard again, incidentally activating the door to one of the buildings.

She did it. When she appeared, she took one look into the eyes of a hell prince, squawked, and fell facedown in the dirt. Smart girl: we were all in ambush position, and we opened fire on the poor hell-spawn.

The minotaur never knew what hit it. Nine flaming snotballs, a machine gun, shotguns, and my own M-14 BAR—I'd found one at last!—and the hell prince staggered back against the rear wall of his building, unable even to muster up a lightning ball from his wrist launcher.

We repeated the process with the other three buildings, and when we finished, we had four empty bunkers and one very dizzy female Marine. I picked her up off the ground and held her under her arms, while we approached the chamber at the rear of the courtyard—that was where we both clearly remembered we would find the Door.

The front Door was locked. I was about to waste a few rounds when Slink stepped forward. "This one may?" she asked, and before I could answer, she shoved her iron fingers behind the latch, splintering the wood, and ripped the entire mechanism off the Door! The unbound wood swung slowly open, creaking like the cry of a banshee.

Inside were three zombies waiting for any visitors. Pfc. Dodd staggered forward, pushed past us, and entered the room. He strode up to his zombie brothers (two brothers and a sister) and began to "talk" in the swinelike grunts and moans of the recently undead.

The female zombie raised her rifle and fired a single shot. It hit Dodd in his mouth, taking out his entire lower jaw. We stared in shock for a moment. Arlene recovered faster than Yours Truly. She pumped the lever on her .45 rifle, firing six quick shots. Arlene killed all three zombies before the rest of us fired a shot.… She killed them before she even had an instant to think.

Then she dropped her gun and ran forward to Dodd, who was flopping disorientedly. She cradled the head and upper body of the rotting corpse in her lap, cooing to it softly. "I'm sorry," she said. I don't think she even realized the rest of us were there. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to shoot you—I had to! Oh, please forgive me, I'm so, so sorry.…" I knew who she was

really apologizing to—the real Dodd was dead and long past caring. But Arlene was alive, and she needed forgiveness.

I don't know how it happened. Her memory of the original Dodd must have been strong. But just for a moment, the zombie Pfc. Dodd reached up and stroked Arlene's cheek! No zombie would have done that, I reckoned. A moment later he died. Again. I turned away, leading the rest of the crew deeper into the building. Behind me, the crying lasted another couple of minutes, then it stopped as if cut off like a faucet. Arlene the lover was finally buried; Lance Corporal Sanders returned to the group and announced, "We'll find the Door behind the rear right piston. Careful not to get crushed."

It was Arlene who found the Door, but Slink Slunk was more excited than the rest of us, for she recognized what it was. "Is bridge!" she cried, capering and gibbering, swinging her hands so violently that she tore a hole in one of the building walls. "Is bridge—connects other place!"

"The other place?" I asked.

Arlene sounded strangely detached, a stranger inhabiting the body of my buddy. "She's right, Fly, it is a bridge connecting us to main operating system of the Disrespect."

"How do you know that?"

Arlene smiled apologetically and shrugged. Her eyes were red from … from something she must have got in them. " 'Cause I remember it. Of course." I approached. The Door looked like a bank vault, solid steel with a combination lock in the very center. The lock comprised eleven wheels, each lettered from A to Z with a space tag between last and first. The mechanics were obvious: line up the wheels so they spelled out the password and turn the huge handle to open the Door. The only fly in the ointment was guessing the right sequence of letters. So what's the big deal? I wondered. There can't be more than about 150 million billion combinations! "Well," I said, sighing. "I guess we'd better get busy. What should we try first?" I looked around, but nobody spoke. "Wait, I have something. Let's try this one."

Smiling, I set the wheels to spell P-A-S-S-W-O-R-D-Space-Space-Space-Space. I turned the handle. The Door clicked and opened.

I stood in the Doorway, staring like a total doofus. If there'd been a snake, it would have bit me; if there'd been a bear, it would have hugged me to death. A password spelled PASSWORD? That was the stupidest damned password I ever saw! When I was in the Applied Crypto Advanced Training Facility in Monterey, that was the standard joke among the students: the idiot who was so stupid that his password literally was that very word! But I had never believed until that moment that anyone could really be so—so braindead.

Evidently, it never even occurred to the Newbies that anyone would ever find one of their back Doors. I smiled. Every time I ran into these Resuscitators, they reminded me more and more of a bunch of college boys.

That made it easier. I could whup college boys. We leveled weapons and slunk through the Door, Slink at my back while I took point, Arlene taking rear, everyone else in between: our standard formation. The Door led to a long corridor—I mean, a long corridor! Six klicks at least and arrow-straight the whole way.

At the end was another Door, just like the first, except this one had no combination lock. I opened the Door abruptly, prepared for the worst.

I wasn't prepared for what I saw. Staring at me was a seven-foot-tall, pearly black shell covered with millions upon millions of squirming vibrating cilia. It sat utterly still except for the cilia—a rounded blob without eyes, ears, or any other sensory organs. We had found the answer, if only we knew what question to ask.

23

“A bug … a bug? A huge freaking bug, that’s what we’re fighting?” Arlene was unhappy; I could tell. She stomped around the tiny cell, looking at the bug from all angles. It pretty much looked the same from every direction.

“I don’t think it’s an insect,” I rumbled.

“It’s a bug! Who cares what kind?”

“Corporal, remember where we are.” I spoke sharply, and she hauled up, shutting her mouth. “What did we just pass through? What was that Doorway you remembered, A.S.?”

“I don’t know, Sarge. A back Door.”

“Come on, what were you thinking? What kind of back Door?”

“Um, something like what they used on us to suck our souls out. That probe that got up inside my nose and into my brain; that was kind of a back Door, like.”

I thought for a long moment, closing my eyes to visualize the system. “Arlene … you saying that all this time, the last three levels, you’ve been thinking of that soul-sucking probe as the back Door we were looking for?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Well, I think that’s exactly what we found.” Her eyes went as wide as dinner plates. “The probe itself?”

“Why not?” I pointed back at the six-kilometer-long corridor we had just spent the last hour traversing. “Isn’t that the tube, the one that sticks through your sinuses into your brain? It looks like it. Why can’t it be?”

She turned back to the bug. Behind me, Slink Slunk, her intended Chomp, and the rest of the crew waited impatiently, not understanding all the talk. “Let’ssss kill bug!” Slink suggested, licking her lips.

“Not just yet, soldier,” I ordered.

“Fly, if that tube connects the system to a soul, then what the hell is this bug anyway?”

I turned up my hands. “How the hell should I know? It’s a soul, right?”

“One of the Res-men? Do they have the probe hooked up to one of them?”

“Well, there’s no one else on the ship, so that’s probably a pretty good guess, A.S.”

She rolled her eyes at my sarcasm. “But why doesn’t it look like a person then? I mean, you look like you to me, and I presume I look like me to you —why does this guy look like a huge bug with squirmy tentacles?”

The answer popped simultaneously into both our minds, and we spoke in unison: “Because … it’s a Newbie soul!”

“Jinx,” Arlene added. “You can’t talk until someone says your name, Fly.”

I circled the bug, still trying to wrap my brain around the concept that I was looking at the soul of a Resuscitator. It didn’t look like a Newbie—but it wasn’t a Newbie, it was the soul…. Who knew what their souls looked like? They were sure as hell different from ours. That was the whole guiding principle behind every freaking invasion and study done on Earth in the last several hundred thousand years—by the Klave, by the Freds, and now by the Resuscitators! Maybe our souls looked just as weird and disgusting to them as theirs did to us. Maybe they were filled with as much violence and anger against us as I was against all the other races in the galaxy, even the Klave.

Of course, the difference was that we were just defending ourselves. They were the aggressors. They had dragged us into their ridiculous war between

different schools of literary criticism, not the other way around! We didn't invade or attack the Fred homeworld, not intentionally. We didn't infest the Newbie minds. We didn't even set up observational posts and spy on the Klave!

It was these bastards, they were behind it all—all of them, all the so-called bio-freaking-logical races of the galaxy, who didn't even consider us living beings because we had different souls than they. "Fine!" I declared, aloud. "So if you can steal our souls, you bastards, then you shouldn't object if I do this." I slung my rifle behind my back, stepped forward, and without even a thought for poison or acid, I wrapped both arms around the damned bug and hoisted it off the floor. Despite its huge size, the damned thing didn't weigh much more than twenty or thirty pounds.

"Fly!" Arlene screamed, evidently thinking about what I had just ignored. But nothing happened to me. I didn't start feeling sleepy or sick or anything, and nothing stung me. The cilia squirmed frantically; I think the thing realized something bad was happening. But it had no way to stop me—the Newbies had long since evolved beyond the "need" for things like arms and legs.

"Fly, put that down!"

"No way, A.S. We're taking a prisoner of war back with us."

"Back where?" She hovered around me like a mother hen, clucking and poking at the thing with her lever-action.

"You got somewhere else in mind? Back into the simulation, of course. This is a dead-end back door you found.… This is as far as it goes, into the head of a Res-man."

Suddenly, the room shook violently. Outside the door, the corridor detached and started pulling away. "Arlene, jump!" I shouted. It wasn't altruism on my part to get her to go first—she was in my way! Arlene didn't waste time asking who, what, where, like a civilian would; she was a Marine, and Marines act first and ask stupid questions afterward. She dove through the door, and I piled through right on top of her. Behind us, the little room—the

brain of a Res-man?—pulled away, vanishing into the distance. Outside our door was only emptiness now, a void of nonexistence that turned my stomach when I looked at it—so I didn't look at it.

"They must've figured out we'd gotten up the probe," Arlene said, "and they yanked it out. But we're so speeded up, compared to them, that they couldn't yank it out fast enough."

"Well, before they think of ripping out the other end," I suggested, "let's get the hell back to Dodge City."

The Newbie soul was like a giant sponge. I discovered I could wad it up into a more manageable ball and tuck it under my arm. We ran the entire six kilometers back to the Deimos lab. The monster apostles never seemed to get tired, and Arlene and I were in Marine-shape. Still, it took us twenty minutes to hoof it back.

Why didn't the Resuscitators destroy the machine? I guess they couldn't believe we had done what we did, or else they were afraid of destroying the soul of their own guy. What was it that the late, lamented Sears and Roebuck said? Something about the greatest crime in all the galaxy being the deliberate destruction of a living soul, a crime so horrific for them to contemplate that there wasn't even a word for it! Even in a pure hive culture—an interesting bit of intel, potentially useful in a war. Too bad the creatures that made the observation were no longer among the living.

We burst through the Door back into the room with all the pumping pistons in the corners. A new pumpkin had decided to invade the place and set up shop.… While Slink Slunk and the boys fought with it and shouted a conversation, trying to convert the thing—they told it about the great martyr Olestradamus—

Arlene and I laid the soul of the Newbie on the floor. A lightning ball brushed just over my head, sizzling the ends of my hair and making all my muscles jerk. The Newbie soul expanded from its wadded-up shape. Now it looked totally different, short and fat, and the cilia were absorbing into a fabriclike coating covering the damned thing's hide. I stared at what used to

be a bug. “What the hell? Arlene, is this what it looks like in the simulation?”

She shook her head. “No, that’s not it—look, Fly, it’s changing again!” She was right. The Newbie soul split into two main globules connected by about a million strands of—flesh, connective tissue?—like pulling apart two lumps of slimy prechewed bubble gum. It changed color from black to dark purple. Then it changed again: the connections widened, flattened, and now they were spatula-shaped. The globules spread out, growing tendrils that circled around until they connected with each other, forming a circle around the flat spatula core. The color changed from static to prismatic, flickering through every color of the spectrum from dark red to nearly white violet, parts of it transparent—maybe too high or low a frequency for us to even see.

“My God, Fly,” Arlene said- “It’s evolving! It’s evolving into something new every second.” A wild shot from our own spineys whizzed between Arlene and me. We dove back, then continued imagineering. “I remember that, A.S. I remember how fast the Newbies evolved … remember?”

“Huh? Yeah, it’s evolving right in front of us! What are you saying?”

“Remember what the one we had as a prisoner from Fredworld said? They evolve faster and faster, speeding up with no upper bound to the curve? Remember?”

Arlene stared at me—a true college kid! Then she finally got it. “Yeah … yeah, I do remember that! And they’re evolving farther and farther away from being a threat to us, remember?”

“Arlene, all this time they’ve been evolving farther away from even being physical beings. Look, see how fast it’s changing now?”

I wasn’t joking. The Newbie was flickering through its different forms so quickly now that it was impossible to fully grasp what one version was before it was subsumed into another. I had a glimpse of crablike claws, a million mouths opening and closing in unison, a spray of spoors! I leapt

back, terrified in spite of my training—I'd never been trained to deal with something like this!

But I knew what we had to do, the direction we had to push it. Here, in the Newbies' own simulation, everything moved a thousand times faster than on the outside … including the Newbie evolution. Arlene moved close and put her arms around me. "I'm remembering real hard now, Fly. They're evolving away from physicality, just like you said…. They're evolving away from even caring about this universe. Evolving toward the, ah, the mind of Brah-ma, simultaneous connection with the entire universe, all the other dimensions above ours." "Uh … yeah, I'm remembering all that, too." I thought I pretty much grasped what she was saying—enough to get a really, really good mental image anyway.

We stood and remembered. The Newbie—definitely no longer a Resuscitator—contracted to a pinprick, then without warning, it exploded in a burst of white light and soundless energy. The light flooded through us, illuminating us from the inside out. But it continued to expand, not pausing even a nanosecond at me or Arlene or Slink Slunk or the other apostles or the monsters or anyone else in the world—in the simulation.

The Newbie was gone. Arlene didn't let go. "See?" she said. "I always said there was some use to science fiction."

I didn't say a word. I was just damned glad she hadn't attributed her brilliant idea, the one that saved all humanity, to a college philosophy course—that, I would have had a very hard time living down! I looked back at our crew and saw that the fight had ended. The pumpkin was sitting on the ground, receiving instruction from Chomp, the most articulate of the imps, on the new quest: hunting down the False-One Freds and butchering them.

Arlene still didn't let go of me. "Fly," she said, "do you think it just went off into the universe all by itself? Or did … ?"

"Did it take its buddies with it? I don't know, A.S. Maybe we'll never know. Arlene, I—I don't think we can ever leave this simulation."

She raised her orange eyebrows, swishing her tongue from one cheek to the other. “I guess you’re right. Our empty bodies are back behind on that planet. If the Newbies are gone, I doubt the former Res-men know how to pull us out of here and stick us back into our bodies anyway.”

“But something occurs to me. There’s no reason this simulation should end unless they turn off the power. If they do that—” “Then we’re dead, and we won’t even know it. But if the Res-men keep it on, Fly …” She scowled at me. “You saying we can live here, in this simulation?” I cleared my throat. “I don’t see as we have much choice, Arlene. You got an appointment somewhere else, soldier?” I softened the tone. “Look, it’s not so bad. We’re getting pretty good at remembering things the way they ought to be, rather than the way they happened to happen the first time. It’s like casting magical spells. We don’t have to remember a horrible world where monsters are trying to kill us every second!”

I pointed at the pumpkin, bouncing slowly into the air and settling back down again, listening to Chomp and Slink take turns proselytizing. (They held each other’s hand … how touching.) “We can remember a world where the damned monsters just go away to live in monasteries. We can remember how we returned to Earth, but we can remember how we stopped the entire invasion this time, turned them back without the millions of dead civilians.”

Arlene looked up at me, blinking a tear out of her eye. Must have been a dust mote; Marines don’t cry. “Do you think I can ever forget Albert’s death?” “Arlene, given enough time and energy, maybe some of that hypnosis … I’ll bet anybody can forget anything.” I detached her arms and sat down, suddenly so tired I could barely keep my eyes open. “At least, we’ll go to our graves trying to forget. He’s in here somewhere, Arlene.… The whole place was constructed from our memories—so he’s here! It’s just a matter of finding him.”

Arlene sat down next to me, expressionless. Her voice sounded as dead tired as mine. “We stopped the Newbies, Fly. We saved Earth … again. That ought to count for something, right?”

“Counts for a lot, A.S.”

“So if your Somebody is up there … maybe He’ll let us find Albert?”

I lay back, feeling consciousness ebb, sleep over-whelming me. I think I answered her, but maybe I only dreamed it. The best Somebody for us to rely on, Arlene, is the somebody inside… not the one up-stairs.

I think I slept for twelve or fourteen hours. I awoke to a brave new world that had such damned peculiar creatures in it!

The End…?